

THRONE OF CARDS



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KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES ALICE IN WONDERLAND BOOK

3



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KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES

You all know the fairytales, the stories that always have the happy ending. But what happens after all those storybook characters get what they wanted? Is it really a happily ever after?

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26 AUGUST



Candlelight flickered from the chandelier that hung above us, casting an orange light over Raven's black hair. We sat on the couch facing each other, the fingers of my hands entwined in his, while I couldn't tear my eyes away from his face.

Around us, the walls were overlaid with dark wood paneling and windows obscured by heavy, embroidered curtains, as though the room was retreating to give us some privacy. Only the glowing embers in the fireplace were a sign of the passing of the night.

He was staring at me with a sense of wonder, and the seriousness was wiped from his expression as he gave me a shy smile.

"When I first sought you out, I assumed you were a rich, spoiled, young lady. When I started to get to know you—when I understood how wrong I'd been—I developed feelings for you, but I never dreamed you might return them." Raven gave my fingers a squeeze as he smiled wide enough to show his fangs. A blush warmed my cheeks, and I leaned forward to lightly brush his lips with a kiss.

"I was afraid of you," I admitted.

Raven chuckled. "I noticed. When did you stop feeling afraid?"

I ran my hand over the smooth leather of the couch as I tried to remember the exact point when my feelings had changed. "I'm not sure," I started. "I feared you, at first, then my feelings became more...complicated. I'm not sure whether I was afraid of you or afraid of my feelings when I was around you."

Raven ran a finger under the line of my chin, turning my face up to look at him.

“Are you afraid of me now?”

With my free hand, I reached forward to brush the strands of hair that fell over his temples. It was so soft, like feathers against my skin. Then, emboldened, I ran my finger across his forehead, down the side of his face, and over his lips. He opened his mouth, showing his fangs, and I touched the tip of one sharp tooth with my fingertip. The point of his fang pressed against my skin, but I didn't push hard enough to draw blood. Raven froze and didn't move until I removed my hand from his mouth and lay it over his cheek.

“If you'd wanted to drink my blood, you could have done it by now,” I whispered.

Raven reached an arm around my waist and pulled me closer. “I want you,” he said, pressing his forehead against mine and closing his eyes, “but not like that.”

My eyes widened at his suggestion, and I sucked in a breath, finding it suddenly more difficult to breathe. Though we'd spent the night together, and into the early hours of the next morning, we'd sat close to each other, touched each other, and whispered in the firelight, but he'd not pushed his advantage over me. He'd been a gentleman.

Raven chuckled. “I can hear your heart racing from here,” he whispered, his breath tickling my ear. “Thundering like the hooves of a racehorse.”

He shifted away from me, moving only fractionally, but putting space between our bodies. “It is very late. Perhaps it is time for me to take you home. Before day breaks.”

“Not yet,” I said, and reached out to cup his face with both of my hands. I pulled him back towards me and kissed him. Our lips touched, lightly, then I pressed toward him, taking the kiss deeper. I wrapped my arms around his neck, erasing the distance between us. I teased his lips with my teeth, then ran my tongue over the sharp edge of his fangs. He held himself back for a moment, then his hands were at my waist, pulling me closer so that I was flush against him.

I was breathing hard, my chest heaving against my corsets. I ran my fingers through the softness of his hair. His hands moved from my waist to my arms, trailing his fingertips up them until he reached my shoulders. Then he was touching my hair and running his fingers down the length of my back.

In the next moment, he was pulling away again. Raven stood up and moved away to stand next to the fireplace.

“Ivy,” he said, his eyes sliding over to me, pupils dilated with desire. “I should take you home.”

I took a deep breath, staring down at my hands as I smoothed my skirts. Then, teasing, I looked up at him under my eyelashes and bit my lip. The candles had burned down to stumps, and a slither of light peeped out of the edge of the curtains. I frowned.

“Too late,” I whispered and felt a stab of disappointment. “The night is already over.”

“Spades,” Raven whispered, frowning as he looked at the curtains covering the windows. He strode over to flick at the edge of the heavy fabric, making sure to stay in the shadows. “You’re right.”

Raven held out a hand to help me to my feet. He pressed a kiss to the back of my hand. “My lady,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I regret that I must let you make your own way home.” He squeezed my hand as he looked me in the eye. “Be careful. Remember—the Queen is returning.”

My eyes widened as I remembered why I’d come to see him in the first place. “I wanted to ask you about that. About the Hearts, the Pinnacle clock. You said it was connected—”

“It is. The city is awaking and coming alive, like an animal, but, like my own kind, it has no beating heart. I smell the fear in this city, and not only among mortals. Even my kind is afraid, and it takes a great evil to scare a vampire.” He ran a finger underneath my chin again. “Be careful,” he murmured, then smiled. “But do not be afraid, my love. I won’t let anything happen to you.”



I bounced into Chesh’s workshop on my way home, arriving so early that I arrived before the shop was open. Chesh eyes widened in surprise, then I noticed him quickly run his gaze over me. I was smiling broadly—I’d been grinning since I’d left Raven’s house to make my way across the city towards home. When I’d rounded the corner and seen the Emporium, I’d made an impulse decision to stop by and see my friend.

“You wore those clothes yesterday,” Chesh remarked. For once, he wasn’t smiling. “Are you alright?”

I laughed loudly, smiling so hard that my cheeks started to hurt. “I’m wonderful. This day is wonderful. Everything is wonderful—wouldn’t you agree?”

Chesh’s frown deepened, and he looked me over again. “Are you drunk?”

I put my hands on my hips and good-naturedly rolled my eyes at him. “Of course, not. I’m just happy. And why shouldn’t I be?” I clasped my hands together and looked up at my oldest friend from underneath my eyelashes. “I think I’m in love.”

He froze, staring at me with wide eyes. A hopeful expression passed over his face.

“Ivy, I—”

“I know, it’s too soon,” I went on. “We’ve only known each other for a week. We’ve barely spent any time together...”

Chesh’s expression darkened. He turned back and slammed one of his tools down on the workbench.

“But he understands me,” I continued, barely noticing Chesh’s behavior. “He understands how I feel about the aesthetic—”

“Spades!” Chesh spun around. “Ivy, listen to yourself! Your sister is recovering from a dreadful attack, the city is in crisis, and your mother is stressed and upset. Yet, you’ve been out all night with a man, and now, you think you’re in love?”

I blinked, surprised by Chesh’s reaction. The smile slipped from my face as his words brought back the events of the previous day. I started to shake my head when he crossed his arms over his chest and glared at me. “You’ve never spoken of this man before. Are you keeping secrets from me now? I believed I meant more to you than that?”

My mouth fell open. “I have told you about him. Mr. Cappello, the owner of *Cappello’s Finest Hats*. I told you—”

“A vampire?” Chesh’s mouth fell open. He ran a hand through his hair, making the tight curls stand up on end like the mane of a lion. “You’re not serious?” Chesh’s expression softened, and he laughed. “You’re joking.”

I gritted my teeth. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re not joking.” Chesh’s face fell again. “What are you thinking? You can’t really be considering a relationship with a vampire. To say

nothing of the scandal it would cause for your mother and your sister, but the danger you put yourself in..."

"Mr. Cappello is not dangerous," I whispered.

"He's a vampire. He drinks blood—human blood." Chesh turned his back to me again, shaking his head in anger and exasperation. "You told me yesterday that you've discovered a problem with the blood banks withholding blood from the vampire population. Where is he getting his blood from?"

I shook my head, pressing my mouth into a thin line. The fog of a sleepless night started to close in on me, and I couldn't think of how to answer him. Deep inside, I knew I didn't need to be afraid of Raven, but could I deny Chesh's statement? I remembered the reason I'd visited Raven in the first place, but I'd been distracted from finding out. Did Raven have that much power over me?

Chesh picked up a tool from his bench. His head hung low, and his shoulders slumped. I felt deflated at the sight of him, and suddenly I just wanted to be at home. I turned towards the door and pulled it open.

"Wait!" Chesh spun around at the tinkle of the bell over the door. "I shouldn't have yelled at you—I'm sorry. Please, don't go." His footsteps came up behind me and he put a hand on my shoulder to stop me from leaving. I closed my eyes as I felt his hand on the place where Raven's had been, so lovingly, only an hour before. I didn't turn around, but I didn't leave, either. "I've been working on something. Want to see it?"

I took a shaky breath, fatigue folding around me like a blanket, but I didn't want to reject his peace offering. I nodded.

Chesh took my hand and lead me around his workshop, talking ceaselessly about the changes he'd made to his machines. We ended up at the flying machine he'd shown me the last time I'd been in his workshop. He still hadn't been able to get it working, but he started to explain an idea he had about why it couldn't sustain flight for more than a few seconds.

I nodded every time he paused for breath, but barely heard a word of what he was saying.

Chesh's reaction at my good news had wounded me, and the heady excitement I'd felt when I'd left Raven's place had drained away to leave me feeling low, as though I was dragging myself through a fog.

"Ivy?" Chesh asked. He sighed when I looked up. He'd been trying to get my attention for a few moments. "May I take you to breakfast?" he

asked. “You look like you’re about to faint.”

All I wanted to go was to curl up into my bed, but I nodded, then found myself being steered out of Chesh’s workshop and towards the nearest teahouse.



I pushed at the runny eggs on my plate with my fork, but I was so tired that my appetite had disappeared. Chesh hadn’t stopped talking since we’d sat down at the table in the front window. It was a cozy establishment, with lights that hung low from the ceiling, casting spotlights over small tables. A small bunch of flowers in a vase decorated the table between us, and flecks of bright orange pollen dusted the tablecloth, giving off a faint smell of rot.

As he talked, Chesh glanced at me every few moments. The smile was back on his face, but it was forced.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed every one of the places in the teahouse was occupied. Each table was laden with food, and people chatted and laughed as they ate. Several tables were being cleared, the food less than half-eaten. Every person was dressed to perfection, with matching hats, coats, gloves, and bags. Once the gloves and hats were removed, I knew they would likely be tossed into the back of the wardrobe—worn, seen, old—never to be used again.

Were any of these people aware of the poverty underneath their city? I imagined the wasted faces of the people in the tunnels, as though they were pressed up against the windows of the teahouse, stomach’s grumbling as they saw food go to waste.

A tinkling sound made my head snap back until I was looking at Chesh, who set down his knife and fork on the plate, which was wiped clean.

“You’ve barely touched yours,” Chesh said. He reached over to touch my hand. I withdrew it from the table and clasped my hands in my lap. A slight frown creased his forehead. “Are you unwell?”

“I’m just tired,” I murmured.

Chesh leaned forward. “I would be more than happy to put myself at your disposal and assist you in cleaning your plate.” He winked.

I looked down at my hands.

When I looked up at him again, his smile had vanished completely. He sighed.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you," he said. "I'm only worried for your safety."

I shook my head, holding up a hand to stop him. "Mr. Cappello wouldn't hurt me. He's a good man—"

"Vampire," Chesh corrected.

I pursed my lips. "He tries to help people. Did you know there are hundreds of people starving in the tunnels underneath this city?"

Chesh raised an eyebrow, shaking his head. "Even if that's true—which I doubt—"

"I've seen them!"

"He's a vampire," he continued. "He drinks human blood. If you're right about the blood banks, then where is he getting his blood from?"

I started to shake my head again. "You don't know—"

Chesh stood abruptly, skirting the tables around us to walk up to the counter and take a copy of *The Daily Hart*. He sat down at the table again, pushing the plates aside to spread the newspaper on the tabletop. "People are going missing," Chesh said. "Haven't you been following this?"

I shook my head, truthfully. There had been so many other puzzles jostling for my attention that I hadn't kept up with the news as much as I usually did.

"Look—another one today." He jabbed a finger at a small article about a man who had gone missing the day before. The print blurred together as I stared at the words. After a pause, Chesh read it out to me.

"Mr. Gavin Littleburn went missing from his place of work yesterday afternoon. A proprietor of *Littleburn and Co Mechanical Inventions*, the reports of Mr. Littleburn's absence comes after several people were reported missing the day before, and several others last week. There do not appear to be any links between those reported missing—who were taken from districts all across Melfall—and President Rowntree has downplayed the facts, reportedly discouraging reporters at *The Daily Hart* from causing unwarranted fear among the people of The Forge. Investigations continue."

"You don't really think Mr. Cappello had anything to do with this, do you?" I looked up at Chesh. "There's no proof..."

"Vampires are predators. They feed on human blood. If vampires aren't getting blood from the blood banks, they're getting it from somewhere. I'd

put my money on the fact that the sudden spate of missing persons reports is linked to the vampires not being able to get blood by legitimate means.”

I shook my head again. “He wouldn’t...”

“You’re an intelligent woman, Ivy,” Chesh banged his hand on the table. Several people at neighboring tables turned to stare at us. He jabbed a finger at the picture in the newspaper. “Don’t tell me your head has been so turned by this man that you can no longer think for yourself, or even see the evidence in front of your eyes.”

I stood, swaying on my feet. I was too tired to think, to argue. “I want to go home,” I said, then marched out, leaving Chesh calling after me.

27 AUGUST



Uninvited, Chesh dumped a stack of copies of *The Daily Hart* on the side table in the sitting room, interrupting my solitude without apology. I looked up from where I was reading, curling up in a large leather armchair, although my eyes had been sliding over the black print without seeing it. Instead, the memory of Raven's face had been interrupting my thoughts all morning.

All morning, I'd burned alternately with desire and, then, with shame as I remembered Chesh's accusation. I couldn't rid myself of the small voice whispering doubts in the back of my mind—that Raven had sought me out, had wanted to know about Alice's whereabouts, had lured me to him, and fooled me with stories. Now I wondered—was he really attracted to me? Or was he the villain that Chesh warned me about? Had he put me under some sort of spell to get closer to Alice? No, I was being silly. Raven might be a vampire, but he wasn't a magician.

Chesh glared at me as he put a finger on the stack of papers.

"The Ivy I know wouldn't have missed this," he said.

"There have been lots of other things going on," I said and crossed my arms across my chest. "The Pinnacle clock, the Hearts—"

"Yes, and for weeks, people have been going missing every day. It started happening just before the Pinnacle clock started working again. Look," Chesh flipped over the first newspaper in the stack. "Mr. Allen Langstaff, master horologist, went missing on 10 August." Chesh passed the article to me, then turned over another. "Miss Gabrielle Larkin, draftswoman, went missing on 11 August."

I found myself staring down at a sketch of a woman's face. The pile of papers rustled, and Chesh continued, tossing the papers into the air as he read through the names and titles of the missing people. The sheets of paper were floating to the floor like snow, covering the plush rug under the armchair where I sat.

"Mr. Mark Maycock, welder, Mr. Joel Wallace, rigger, Mr. Bartholomew Chickering, mechanical engineer, all missing since 13 August, Mrs. Grace Fischer, machinist, Mr. Samuel Cadwell, blacksmith, both missing since 15 August, Mr. Daniel Dorchester, mold maker, missing since 16 August, Miss Emmeline Beard, technical engineer, Mr. James Rexword, mechanic, Miss Emma May Whitten, mathematician, Mr. Byron Day-Forsythe, mechanical inventor, all went missing on 20 August. Mr. Lucius Perch, civil engineer. Miss Peggy Barclay, automotive engineer..."

My eyes widened as I listened to the list of missing persons. I prided myself on being aware of what was happening in the city, and on being able to advise Alice. How had I missed this?

I stood, going to stand at Chesh's shoulder. He flicked over another page, this time *The Daily Hart* edition of the 23 August. "Mrs. Iris Barclay, electrical engineer," I murmured.

"Mr. Clement Hellyar, robotics expert," Chesh said, flicking over the page to the next edition.

"Mr. Tom Griffin, founder," I added.

"Mr. Gavin Littleburn, inventor, missing as of yesterday," Chesh finished.

We both looked at the papers spread out all over the floor. "That's a lot of people," I murmured, frowning as I tried to make sense of it. "Do they suggest a pattern?"

Chesh shook his head.

"Common elements?" I asked, peering at the latest article in front of me.

"No," Chesh replied. "They're from all over the city. They're not friends, nor colleagues, nor acquaintances. Some went missing from their place of work, or on the way to work, or on their way home, or on their way to the shops, or while running errands." He crossed his arms over his chest. "You know the only thing they have in common," he said, giving me a hard stare.

I didn't pick up on the hard edge to his voice as I stared at all of the faces looking up at me. There seemed to be something about the group that linked them, but I couldn't quite see it. "What?" I asked.

"You know," Chesh repeated. "Think about it."

"If you know the answer, there's no need to keep it to yourself," I replied.

"They've all got blood running through their veins."

I froze, closing my eyes. Raven's face appeared in my memory, soft under the firelight, smiling at me. I put my fingers to my lips, remembering the feel of his kiss. I was shaking my head when Chesh's hands were on my shoulders shaking me. "There's nothing else. Nothing else. They're alive. They're people. They're food. That's what they have in common."

"You don't know that," I retorted. "You're guessing."

Chesh groaned. "Even if you think you've stumbled across the one vampire in Melfall who is starving his natural instincts to feed—which I doubt,"

I remembered the look on his face when Raven told the story about his mother feeding on his siblings. "I know he wouldn't do—"

"Even if that's so, you don't think the rest of them are starving themselves, do you?"

"I've been looking into where the blood donated to the blood banks is going," I said. "I think the Tweedles have something to do with it."

"The Tweedles make mischief," Chesh said. "They don't kill people."

"There's no evidence that these people are dead," I said, though my conviction was hollow. "Have the families been blackmailed? Have there been any demands?"

"None, but if they're not dead, where are they hiding?" Chesh said, but he didn't wait for a reply. "Do you know how many people went missing in July?"

I shook my head.

"None," Chesh said. "Do you know how many people went missing in June?"

I stared at him.

"Or May? April?" Chesh raised an eyebrow. "None. Only two people have gone missing this year. One turned up a few weeks later after mistaking a hallucination-inducing pleasure drug for an anti-aging tonic. He regained his senses somewhere in a small village in the countryside. The

other was stabbed in a disagreement over a woman after a number of strong drinks. The murderer hid the body, then confessed to authorities several weeks later.”

“What about last year?”

Chesh shrugged a shoulder. “You don’t find this suspicious?” He gave me a disbelieving look. “Ivy...”

I held up a hand. “Yes, I think it seems out of the ordinary. I just don’t...” *I don’t think Raven is involved.*

Chesh rolled his eyes. He gestured towards the missing persons articles with one hand. “Any other ideas?”

I took a deep breath and turned my attention to the scattered papers. They were a mess of sketched faces and text against the background of the shag rug. I bent down to gather them in a pile. “Let’s look at this properly,” I said and led Chesh across the hall and into the President’s Library.

It looked as though nobody else had been in this room since the last time I’d been here, and I cleared away the newspapers about the Red Queen’s reign, and spread the articles out methodically in date order of when the people went missing. As I put down each article, I took a good look at the face, read the article over again, and considered the elements—their age, their place of residence, their place of work, trying to find possible links between them.

“There are no children among them,” I noted, once I’d spread the papers all over the table. “Nor very old people. These people are all working age.”

“There’s still a wide variation in age,” Chesh replied. “Some have barely finished their studies, while others have decades of experience.”

I shrugged, not taking my eyes off the articles spread around the table, as though the solution to this puzzle might leap off the pages.

“Did they have any interaction with the Hearts?” I asked.

Chesh frowned. “None of the articles mention the Hearts.”

“Yet, the timing is similar.” I walked slowly around the large table, looking at the papers from a different angle, as though it might give me more insight into the problem.

I pointed to a face I recognized. Mr. Byron Day-Forsythe. “Do you know him?”

Chesh nodded. “He’s a talented inventor—officially one of our competitors, but we studied together, you know.” Chesh pointed to another face. “I also know Mr. Littleburn. He’s a friend of my father’s. He owns a

shop selling the gadgets he's invented across the other side of the city. They're both members of the Inventor Guild." Chesh peered at the articles with renewed interest. "In fact, Byron was an apprentice in the Inventor Guild."

I cast him a quick look, then ran my eye over the other professions listed. "Do you think that might be a common factor? Guild membership?"

"Not of one particular guild," Chesh said, but he made a wry face as he conceded. "They might all be members of the United Guilds."

The first hint of a smile touched my lips as a bubble of enthusiasm grew inside of me. "They all belong to professions related to building or inventing things," I said. "Welder, rigger, different kinds of engineers, machinist, mold maker, mechanic, draftsman..."

There was a moment of silence. I could hear the ticking of the Pinnacle clock in the distance.

"Perhaps we should check the United Guild—they keep all the memberships of the guilds, right?" I suggested. "I'm sure the grandmasters will provide the membership rolls if Mother asks them. We can check these names against them, to see if a pattern emerges."

Chesh tapped his finger over the sketch of Byron's face. An expression of indecision passed over his face.

"What?"

Chesh looked up at me. "I'm not discounting the probability that vampires are involved in this...but I have another friend who is apprenticing in the Inventor Guild. Maybe we should pay him a visit? He might be able to tell us something about this that we don't know."



"Why are Mr. Day-Forsythe and Mr. Pankhurst members of the Inventor Guild, and you aren't?" I asked Chesh as we took the steps up to the residence of Mr. Oscar Pankhurst, an apprentice in the Inventors Guild. He lived in a three-story townhouse with large windows decorated with stained glass. The door was set above street level, only accessible by a set of steps bound by an ornate wrought iron railing.

Chesh removed his hat as he lifted a hand to grasp the heavy knocker, shaped in the beaked head of a flamingo pecking at the heavy wooden door.

He paused, looking down at his feet.

I frowned. “Your father is a member of the Inventor Guild, and you’re his apprentice. Doesn’t that give you automatic membership?”

Chesh blushed, dropping his eyes away from me, clearing his throat, but he didn’t immediately answer. “Yes,” he whispered.

“So, why aren’t you a member?” I asked. “Don’t you want to be part of the Guild?”

“I do,” Chesh responded, meeting my eyes again. His eyes were suddenly alight with passion. “I just don’t want to get in because of who my father is. I want to be a member because I have a talent for it. I want to prove myself.”

“What do you have to do to prove yourself?”

“If your father is not a member of the Inventor Guild, there is a process by which one has to be recommended by a guild member. Then, one has to present an original invention to a panel of the masters. They vote as to whether the invention, as presented, pushes the boundaries of knowledge and technological creation. It’s not enough to be able to build things—that might get a person into the Mechanic Guild, or the Metallurgy Guild, but an invention has to be impressively original and useful to obtain admittance to the Inventor Guild.”

“You are a good inventor with a flair for new ideas. I’m sure one of the gadgets you’ve been working on would satisfy their requirements.”

Chesh looked down at his feet. “Not good enough. Not yet. I’m not leaving it to chance. I won’t take a half-baked invention to the masters. I won’t shame my father by presenting something to them that isn’t good enough. One only has one chance.”

I nodded my head. “Did Byron have family connections within the Guild? Or did he present to the panel?”

Chesh raised an eyebrow. “He didn’t say, and I never asked.”

“Does Oscar?” I asked.

Chesh sighed. “No, Oscar’s father isn’t in the Inventor Guild. Mr. Pankhurst Sr. is a respected administrator within the First Forge Bank. He heads the division that administers the aesthetic stipend. Oscar was supposed to follow in his father’s footsteps and take a career in the bank. Instead, he became an inventor. His father hasn’t cut him off, but he’s threatened it. I think he’s hoping Oscar will come to his senses and return to the family business. Oscar’s a genius, though. We studied together. He’s a

good friend. He's been a good sounding board about...many things...over the years I've known him. I trust him—he'll tell us if there's something going on that we should know about.”

Then, without giving me the chance to ask any more questions, he lifted the knocker to bang it against the door.

We didn't wait long before a butler appeared at the door. He wore a smart suit in black and a white bow tie with his hair slicked back—typical of a butler in a wealthy, fashionable family. He looked down over his long nose with eyebrows raised as he waited for us to state our business.

Chesh introduced me, then asked to see Mr. Pankhurst.

The lines of the butler's mouth drooped as he delivered the news. “I'm afraid Mr. Pankhurst Jr. hasn't been seen since yesterday, sir. His parents have just reported his absence to the authorities. They are most anxious for any knowledge of his whereabouts. You don't happen to know where he might be, do you?”



Chesh paced with his fists clenched. His bright golden curls stood on end, and the back of his shirt was untucked, his vest undone, and he'd thrown his jacket over the back of a chair in a most un-Chesh-like manner.

After we politely asked for our condolences to be passed along to Mr. and Mrs. Pankhurst, we had returned to Chesh's home. Like the workshop, Chesh's house was full of inventions. At the door, an automatic butler had seized my hat and coat. A series of pulleys had lit a lamp as we pushed on a door to enter the sitting room. Everywhere I looked, I saw gears, pulleys, and moving cogs.

Chesh hadn't said a word since we'd left the Pankhurst residence, but the energy emanating from him was like heat from an oven.

“It's alright to be worried,” I said to him as I watched him stride back and forth across the room. “We'll figure it out.”

Chesh spun around. “There's nothing to figure out. You don't want to see the most obvious solution. It's not members of the guilds kidnapping each other—they wouldn't do that. It's the vampires killing for blood. Why can't you see what's right in front of your eyes?”

I stepped back, physically recoiling from the force of Chesh's outburst. "You don't have any proof of that," I said. I tried to keep my voice calm, but even I could hear the hard edge in it.

Chesh threw up his hands. "Is it because of your new boyfriend? What kind of magic does he possess that he's preventing you from seeing what's right in front of your face?"

I reeled back at the sight of bared teeth in Chesh's angry face. It reminded me of Raven's fangs, though he'd never looked so fierce. "He's a monster. They're all monsters. They'd feast on us all if it wasn't for—"

"For who?" I demanded, rounding on him.

"For the fact that they need us to keep producing, to keep their source of fresh blood available."

"Pragmatic monsters, then?" I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him. Then I saw the tight set of his face and reminded myself that he was mourning a friend. I took a deep breath and dropped my hands to my side. "I'm sorry. I know you're upset about Oscar."

Chesh turned away, shaking his head.

"I just don't understand why you're so fixated on the vampires. What if it's not them?"

"What if it is?" Chesh spun around.

I threw my hands in the air. "What if it isn't?"

Chesh shook his head again, then stepped forward to grasp me by the shoulders. "If I'm wrong, then we will have locked up a few vampires for a few days. If I'm wrong, we'll let them out. If I'm right, more people will die while we investigate far-fetched theories and non-existent patterns. Who else has to die before you'll see the truth in front of your face? Remember the vampire that attacked you in the alley two weeks ago?"

I shivered as the memory of his desperate face flashed into my mind. I pursed my lips but nodded. "That's what they're like when they need blood. That's why they're doing this."

"It doesn't make sense," I started, thinking of how Raven had helped Wit's patients. Then the memory of the vial of black market blood entered my traitorous mind. Where had it come from?

"It makes perfect sense to me," Chesh retorted.

The fight went out of me, like a hiss of steam, and I sank back onto the cushioned armchair in the corner of the room. I thought about Raven—about the glimmer of the candlelight against the darkness of his hair, about

the touch of his lips against mine, about the way he smiled at me with the sparkle of hope in his eyes. Then I remembered the secrets he'd held, that he still held, and wondered whether Chesh was right—was I seeing just what I wanted to see?

Two nights ago, I'd felt perfectly safe in Raven's arms. I remembered the dreams I'd had about him biting my neck. The other night, in his arms, I'd thought I'd been dreaming about him kissing me, but maybe I'd been right in the first place. Maybe my dreams were trying to warn me away from his charming demeanor. Perhaps, he liked to play with his prey. Perhaps, he was enjoying some sort of elaborate game, to lure me into a place of trust, before he drank my blood.

I shook my head, pushing away the memories. Raven had, had many opportunities to attack me if that was what he wanted. He might have secrets, but that didn't mean he was a killer.

Chesh knelt down in front of me, a frown lining his face as he gazed up at me. He put a hand on my skirts.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I know you think you're in love. I wish I didn't have to tell you, but if you were to go to your mother or sister, they would give you the same advice."

"What advice is that?" My voice cracked as I choked out the words.

"A romantic relationship between a young woman and a vampire man? It's just not...possible. Not in The Forge. Nobody would accept it. It's like a marriage between a beautiful person and an unbeautiful one. It just doesn't happen."

A lump formed in my throat. I looked outside at the bustle of people on the avenue in their bright, fashionable clothes, with their tall hats embellishing perfect hairstyles, and their servants hurrying behind laden with bags full of more purchases of more clothes and hats and other beautiful things.

They didn't seem beautiful to me now. It was grotesque.

It was wrong. All of it.

"Perhaps it's time The Forge changed," I whispered.

28 AUGUST



I charged into Alice's chambers. "Mother?"

In my hands, I held a piece of paper with the scribbled notes I'd been preparing all through the night, after I'd left a grieving, angry Chesh at his house. I hadn't been able to convince him, but I was determined to convince Alice that the time was right, finally, for The Forge to change.

In my room, I'd sat at my desk, pushing aside the parts of my latest pocket watch as I tried to gather my arguments in writing. Mostly I'd screwed up balls of papers as I tried to marshal my whirling thoughts into a cohesive petition that Alice could consider. Every time I read over my efforts, I discarded them with growing frustration. Eventually, but only after the candles had burned down to stubs, had I reached a draft that I was happy with.

At the doors to her chambers, Jack tried to stop me, but I strode past him and pushed open the doors. I gripped my notes in my fingers, with such force that I was worried I'd tear the paper in half.

I glanced down at the words I'd written, suddenly full of doubts. Would it be enough to change her mind? Or would she dismiss me like Chesh had?

When I looked up into the room again, I came up short. Alice wasn't alone.

She was with Princess Gaia and her bodyguard, both of whom I'd met at Wit's rooms.

Alice's back was to me, but I could tell from the tense set of her shoulders that something was wrong.

"Mother?" I asked.

Alice turned slowly around. In her hands, she held a handkerchief. Her eyes were red, and her cheeks wet from crying.

“Mother? Is something wrong?” A terrible heavy weight dragged on me. “Has Pearl suffered a relapse?”

Alice shook her head. “Pearl is fine.” Her eyes filled with tears again as she looked at me.

I nodded towards Gaia and her guard. “Have they upset you?”

Alice sniffed, then covered her face with her hands. Gaia put her hands at her shoulders and urged her to sit down in an armchair.

“Take your hands off my mother,” I said, gritting my teeth.

The guard stepped in front of Gaia. He said nothing, but he would not let me come any closer.

“There’s no need for this, my love,” Gaia said, coming up behind him to put her hands on his arms. I guess he wasn’t her guard after all unless it was customary to call guards love in Badalah. By the way he looked at her with adoring eyes, I doubted their relationship had anything to do with custom. She beckoned me forward. “Your mother has something to tell you,” she said. Then she reached out a hand and guided me to sit down in an armchair opposite Alice.

“Mother?” I asked.

Alice glanced at Gaia, who nodded. Alice took a shuddering breath, and new tears sprang to her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Ivy, I should have told you this a long time ago.”

I pleated my fingers into the fabric of my skirts, waiting. The papers I’d prepared were scrunched in my lap. “What is it?”

“You’re not my daughter,” Alice whispered.

There was silence for a beat. Then I started laughing. Gaia and her companion exchanged a look. Alice looked stunned.

“What are you talking about? Pearl looks exactly like you. Even if you wanted to disinherit us, nobody would believe we’re not blood relations.”

Alice folded her hands in her lap. “You don’t understand. Pearl is my daughter. You are not.”

“But we’re...” *Twins. Non-identical twins.*

“I know that’s what I told you. I wanted you to feel like you belonged to us. I didn’t want you to feel different from your sister. I loved you—both of you. I still love you as though you were my own.” Alice reached out a hand to me.

I stared at her, shrinking away. “Pearl isn’t my sister? You’re not my mother? But...” Words failed me. I didn’t know where to start. I stared at Alice, seeing her tear-stained cheeks and downturned mouth, but couldn’t comprehend it. I started shaking my head, waiting for them to tell me I’d misheard. I glanced at Gaia, who was watching me carefully.

“This can’t be...” I started. Then I closed my eyes and put my hands over my face. The faint ticking of the Pinnacle clock filled my mind and steadied the whirl of disconnected thoughts.

“Ivy?” Alice reached out for me.

I dropped my hands from my face and clasped them in my lap. “Where did I come from?” I asked her, then glanced at Gaia again. “What are you doing here?”

Alice cleared her throat, looking over at Gaia, as though she suddenly remembered that she hadn’t made a formal introduction.

“I’m sorry, Ivy. Please allow me to present Princess Gaia and Genie of Badalah.”

“Ivy and I are acquainted already, Madam President,” Gaia interrupted smoothly. “She is the reason I sought you out. You see, I believe we are somehow related.”

“A connection?” I blurted out. “Between you and me?” I turned to Alice. “If Pearl and I are not sisters, what makes you think I’m related to a distant princess?” I stood abruptly. “None of this makes sense. Nothing makes sense!” I looked from Alice to Gaia and back again, then whirled around with the intention of leaving.

“Ivy, sit down,” Alice said, “please.”

I stopped, looking over my shoulder to see Alice coming over to me. She took me by the shoulders and turned me to face her. Then she took my face in her hands. “Please, listen to me. I will explain everything.”

I let Alice draw me over to the chaise. She sat next to me and held both of my hands in hers.

“Pearl is my natural born daughter. As you say, we look very much alike. On the night she was born, an old woman came to my door, holding a baby. You.” Alice smiled, and there was a dreamy, faraway look in her eyes, as though she was watching the memories play out in her mind. “She asked me to take you in.”

“Was she my mother?” I asked.

Alice frowned, as though trying to remember. “I don’t think so. I believe she was the midwife.”

I stared at her without really seeing anything. I felt heavy, as though a weight pinned me down so that I was unable to move, but at the same time, it was as though I’d been set adrift. Floorboards creaked as Genie moved closer to Gaia, placing a hand on her shoulder. A bunch of red roses was like a bloodstain on the side table by the wall. The curtains fluttered lightly next to the open window.

“What happened to my mother?” I heard myself speaking, though my voice sounded strange to my own ears.

“She didn’t say. She only said you needed a new home, and that it was imperative for the peace of The Forge—for the Twelve Kingdoms—that I take you in.” Alice smiled. “In any case, I couldn’t have refused. The moment I set eyes on you, I decided you would be the sister that my Pearl would never otherwise have. I decided I would love you and treat you as my own.”

“You were a beautiful baby, Ivy. Your eyes had an unusual gold ring around the iris—they still do.” Alice blinked and then reached out to stroke my cheek. Then she turned to look at Gaia. “As do Gaia’s eyes... It’s so rare. I wonder if you two are sisters.”

Gaia walked up to me, staring at me. We looked nothing alike. Nothing at all. Where I was fair with green eyes and blonde hair, Gaia had dark skin, brown eyes, and black hair. She was a couple of inches taller than me. Looking at her, I didn’t see any resemblance at all. I looked more like Pearl than the princess, but there was no denying the gold ring around her irises. It was identical to mine.

“Did you grow up with our mother?” I asked Gaia.

She shook her head. “I was brought up as the daughter of the King and Queen of Badalah. The midwife brought me to them, as she brought you to Madam President. I loved them, though—I still do. They are still my parents.”

I looked at Alice, who had tears streaming down her cheeks once again. She reached a hand hesitantly toward me. “I love you, Ivy. I hope you always know that.”

Tears prickled at my own eyes, and a lump formed in my throat. I couldn’t answer her. I nodded as the tears spilled over. I reached over to grip her hand, as though it were a rope, a lifeline. Alice pulled me to her,

and tears racked my body as I leaned my head against her shoulder and cried, as she stroked my hair and whispered my name, over and over.



“There are others,” Gaia said. “Like us.”

I frowned. “What do you mean, like us?”

Gaia and Genie looked at each other. “Ivy,” Gaia came to sit on the couch next to me, on the opposite side to Alice. I turned my body so that I could look at her directly. “Have you ever noticed anything different about yourself?”

I burst out laughing. “Many things,” I replied.

Gaia elegantly raised an eyebrow. “Such as?”

“I don’t seem to fit in here—in Melfall. I don’t take the aesthetic stipend. I don’t spend enough time thinking about beauty and fashion. I spend far too much time making watches, tinkering with machines, and solving puzzles.”

“That wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” Gaia replied.

“Do you care to be a little more specific?”

Gaia held up her hand, as though she was pointing a finger towards the ceiling. Then, as she watched me, the tip of her finger burst into flame as though her finger was a candle.

“Magic?” I asked.

Gaia flicked her fingers, and the flame went out. “I have an affinity for fire,” she shrugged. Then she pointed to her eyes. “Alice has already noticed the similarity between our eyes. I believe our other siblings will have similar eyes.”

“Siblings?” I gasped. “I have other brothers and sisters, too?”

Gaia nodded. “There are at least five of us, so far.”

“So far?”

“Strange things have been happening across the Twelve Kingdoms. In Badalah, peace came to our kingdom eighteen years ago. My parents married, and they did much for the poor people of the kingdom. Then, recently, things started to change. My father, the king, started to forget who he was. My mother didn’t recognize him anymore. *Nobody* remembered who he was anymore. Then he disappeared and started living like a street

urchin, as he had been doing before he met my mother. The reason I came to The Forge was to try to find a potion to bring back their memories.”

“The Queen of Hearts disappeared eighteen years ago,” I whispered.

“She died,” Alice said, closing her eyes and going very still.

Gaia raised an eyebrow, looking at me.

“It’s possible, but her body wasn’t found,” I cleared my throat. “I heard she was—or is—a vampire. If that’s true, she would not have been easy to kill.”

“Has anything strange happened here recently?”

I looked at Alice, who was rubbing her temples. Outside, the clock chimed, and I noticed the pink and purple hues of sunset splashed across the sky outside. I was suddenly reminded that I’d planned to go to see Raven this evening at sunset.

My breath caught in my throat as I felt myself pulled in two directions. I wanted to get to know Gaia, especially if she might be able to help me understand the puzzles that had been plaguing me for weeks. On the other hand, I remembered Chesh’s friend, Oscar. Raven might be able to tell me what had happened to him. I was still trying to decide whether to excuse myself when Alice stood.

“I think I will leave you two to get to know each other better. I would like to check in on Pearl. Please excuse me, Princess.”

“Please, call me Gaia,” Gaia replied, but Alice was already out of the room.

When the door clicked closed, Gaia turned to me. “I take it that strange things have been happening in The Forge as well?”

I nodded, turning my body towards her again as I made a decision. Starting at the beginning, I laid out the events of the past couple of weeks and detailed the puzzles that had been worrying me: the Pinnacle clock, the Hearts, the problems at the blood banks, the missing people.

“I can’t make sense of it,” I said as I finished the story. “Do you know what’s been happening here?”

Gaia looked at Genie then, gently, she reached over to take my hand. “I think it’s related to what’s happened in the Badalah, and other kingdoms. I can’t tell you much more than that, though. I have too many unanswered questions myself.”

I sighed as the Pinnacle clock struck the hour once more.

29 AUGUST



Sunlight streamed into the tall windows of the breakfast room. Gaia leaned over the speckled weeper set into a vase in the middle of the dining room. “Everything is so different here.”

A red bird was perched on the mantel. It squawked loudly as Gaia reached out to touch the brightly colored petals of the flower.

“Don’t get too close,” I warned her. “That plant is not only poisonous, but it eats flesh—it will take the finger off your hand if it catches you in its trap.”

Gaia straightened, her eyes widening, and she took a big step backward.

I looked at her, noting the way the light material of her robes flowed and her bangles and necklaces jingled as she moved. The silky darkness of her hair fell in braids down her back.

“I’ve never been out of The Forge,” I admitted. “I’ve never even been outside the walls of Melfall. Is Badalah very different?”

Gaia smiled, and the act lit up her face with joy. “Very different. Our weather is hot, but also very dry. The buildings in our city are not made of grey stone but of red mud-bricks. There are market stalls on every corner, and the air smells like spices.”

“Do you miss it?”

The smile didn’t leave Gaia’s face, but she looked suddenly sad. “I miss my parents. I know they are not my real parents, but they raised me and loved me. I don’t like to see my father homeless and forgotten—not after spending so much of the last eighteen years improving the lives of the poor people in our kingdom. Now that he’s forgotten, my kingdom seems to have forgotten everything that happened since he took the throne. My people

have forgotten their hearts. They don't care about each other anymore. I love them all, but I don't want to see my home like this. That's why I came here—I need to find a way to help my parents and my kingdom get their heart back.”

Genie put a hand in the small of her back. She turned to look at him, her eyes full of concern.

“We will find a way,” he said.

“Perhaps our homes aren't so different after all,” I murmured. “The people of The Forge lost their hearts too—or perhaps that was already happening when the Queen of Hearts ruled—but the poor, sick, and unsightly among our people are banished to starve underground where they cannot be seen by anyone. Where people don't even know they exist.”

Gaia watched me with a serious look on her face. “You see them,” she said. “It troubles you.”

I nodded.

“I came here to find a memory potion for my parents, for my people, but when I met Dr. Lapin, I saw first-hand the plight of the unbeautiful people of The Forge.”

The door to the dining room swung open, and Alice and Pearl walked in. Pearl's hair fell in soft ringlets around her face and spilled over her shoulder, but she was leaning on Alice's arm for balance.

A small crease formed on Pearl's forehead as her eyes were drawn to Gaia. She pursed her lips, appraising the princess, then looked at me with tears in her eyes.

“Mother told me,” she said. Her lip wobbled. “I can't believe it.”

A heavy feeling settled in my stomach. It hadn't occurred to me that Pearl would be affected by this news too.

I went over to her and drew her into a hug. “Nothing has changed. You're still my sister.”

Pearl pulled away, glaring at Gaia. “For how long?” she said. Then she shook her head and moved to sink into the nearest chair. Her face was still pale, and the dark smudges under her eyes remained. She was wearing a robe over her underclothes, tied at the waist—she must have felt worse than she let on since it was unheard of for her to receive guests in a less than perfect state of dress.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

Pearl waved the question away, while Nancy, the housekeeper, hurried to pour tea. Alice settled in the seat next to Pearl and motioned for Gaia and Genie to sit down with us.

“How are you finding Melfall, Princess?” Alice asked, after formally introducing Pearl to Gaia and Genie.

“I was just telling Ivy that it is very different from Badalah.”

Alice raised her eyebrows. “Is that so? I will admit that I have not visited your kingdom. Matters in The Forge keep me very busy.”

“I’m sure. My family is the same. We rarely travel further than the boundaries of our own kingdom. Though I sometimes wonder whether it would be better for our people if we did. Surely, the exchange of ideas and cultures can benefit more than just those of us who can afford to make the journey? I have, during our few days here, seen several things I would like to take back to my kingdom, to show them what is possible.”

“What is it that you have found so interesting in The Forge?”

“The hats, of course,” Pearl interjected. “We have the finest milliners of all of the Twelve Kingdoms here in The Forge. Why, just the other day, Ivy gave me the most beautiful hat I’ve ever seen. It is as though it was made for me. There cannot be another one equal to it anywhere in the world.”

Gaia gave her a tight-lipped smile. “There are many beautiful things in The Forge, but there are many beautiful things in my kingdom too. Actually, I was talking about some of the inventions I have encountered here. Your subjects are both ingenious and industrious to create things that make people’s lives better.”

Alice nodded. “Ivy is an example of such creative industry,” she said. “She has an affinity for machines—she always seems to be able to make things work when others cannot—”

Gaia raised an eyebrow at me. “Does she?”

“—and she makes the most beautiful pocket watches,” Alice finished. She fished out the pocket watch that I’d made for her several years ago. “She made this watch for me. She made one for you too, didn’t she, Pearl?”

Pearl nodded. “Mine is the finest pocket watch I’ve ever seen.”

“That is very clever,” Gaia said, examining the watch that Alice handed her. “Where did you learn this trade, Ivy?”

A warm, pleasant feeling spread through me at the joy of my sister’s compliment. “I don’t really remember,” I replied. “I just started taking pocket watches apart to see how they worked, then I found I knew how to

put them together again. I wanted to understand them. Sometimes, it's as though I can feel their working parts—the way they should be—underneath my touch." I shook my head, blushing. "I'm not explaining myself very well."

Gaia gave me a strange look. "You have an affinity for them? For watches? Or for all machines with working parts?"

"For all machines, I suppose. My friend, Chesh—Mr. Cheshire—always complains that I find what's wrong with them faster than he can. I guess, I just *know*."

"Mr. Cheshire is also very good at inventions, isn't he, Ivy?" Pearl interrupted.

I looked sideways at her, frowning slightly as I wondered at her interruption.

Gaia didn't seem to have even heard Pearl speak. "That's an unusual gift," she said. "What else do you do? Dr. Lapin suggested that you work for the president?"

I swallowed, about to answer, as Pearl rolled her eyes.

"Honesty, I've told Ivy time and time again that she should collect the aesthetic stipend, like every other worthy person in The Forge—but she refuses!"

Warmth rose to my cheeks, and I cleared my throat. Gaia glanced at me, raising her elegant eyebrows.

"It's an old custom here," Alice explained, forcing Gaia to turn her attention to her. "A remnant from when the late Queen reigned. She held the ideal of beauty above all. She rewarded those who were beautiful and punished those who were not. These habits were so entrenched among the people that change was impossible. In those days, I was barely holding the city together. In the absence of the late Queen—who had reigned in The Forge with an iron fist for a long time—the old families vied for power, the vampires killed indiscriminately, and the city was chaos." Alice sighed. "In fact, these days, it seems as though nothing has changed."

"The vampires are not killing indiscriminately," I spoke up, blushing, as I remembered the conversation I'd had with Chesh two days before. "There are problems with blood supply from the blood banks, but I don't think the vampires are responsible for the missing people in this city."

"Missing people? Are they connected with those who have lost their livelihoods because they don't conform to the aesthetic standards of The

Forge?” Gaia asked, pointedly.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

Alice frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I understand there are people there are who cannot collect the aesthetic stipend, and who lose their livelihood because they do not comply with the standards, who can no longer pay their bills. I have heard that these people are forced to hide away in places where ordinary citizens cannot find them.”

“Where did you hear about this?” Alice demanded. “I know of no such people.”

I cleared my throat. “Actually, Mother, I have seen them for myself. People who are poor, sick, scarred, or disabled. Physically...unbeautiful.”

Pearl shuddered. “I’m glad I haven’t seen them. They’d give me nightmares.”

I glared at her. “They live in tunnels under the city, by the grace of people who try to help them.”

Alice’s eyes widened. “That can’t be possible.”

“I have seen them, Mother,” I replied. “It’s why I’ve been trying to speak to you about the aesthetic laws—they must be revoked. The aesthetic stipend, too—”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Pearl exclaimed, and her eyes widened with shock at the suggestion. “How would we live without the stipend? It needs to be raised, if anything. The unbeautiful don’t have the expenses of keeping up with the latest fashions and styles. They can simply...” Pearl waved a hand in dismissal, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “Anyway, people wouldn’t stand for it. They’d rise up in revolt.”

Gaia turned a pleasant look to Pearl. “I’m sure a young woman, such as yourself, would find other ways to earn a living. Wouldn’t it be more satisfying to earn a wage doing something worthwhile?”

Pearl looked at her with a look of shock on her face. “Earn a wage? I don’t have time to work! How would I maintain my image if I had to go to work every day? Mother works herself into the ground. Ivy doesn’t spend nearly as much time as she should on her appearance. Sometimes she leaves the house in such a state of disarray that I’m almost ashamed of her.”

“Pearl! That’s no way to speak of your sister,” Alice said. She turned to Gaia. “Are things so different in your kingdom?”

Gaia shrugged. “There are no laws about beauty in Badalah, but we have plenty of poor people. They are not forced into hiding, but they live

difficult lives. My parents and I try to help to feed them, to help them, but more should be done. My home is not perfect, either. In fact, I fear things will have become worse while I've been away." She glanced at Genie. "Before my parents ascended the throne, very little help was given to the poor. Petty crime flourished, and ordinary people starved and lived in squalor."

"Do you fear things are going back to the way they used to be?" I asked.

Gaia nodded. "Something is happening there—my parents have forgotten each other, have forgotten how they have reigned for the last eighteen years, and the people have forgotten them."

"That's why you came here, to find a cure for their loss of memory," I said.

Gaia nodded. "I fear there is no cure."

I frowned, glancing at Alice. "Mother, you said The Forge seems to be going back to the way things were before you became President. In Badalah, too, things have taken a backward turn."

Gaia nodded. "I think you're right. There are problems in The Forge, and it sounds like some of these problems were in place long before the fall of the late Queen. As you've said, it's almost as though society is going backward—back to a time when the late Queen reigned..."

"I do try to do the best for my people," Alice said, and I noticed she was sitting stiffly straight-backed on the edge of the chair. Her cat, Young Dinah, was curled in her lap, but Alice wasn't stroking her soft white fur. Instead, her hands were clasped together. "Sometimes, they seem to be children, needing guidance."

"Mother, this isn't your fault," I said. "You work very hard for The Forge. Nobody doubts that."

"Not hard enough, it seems," Alice looked down and pressed her lips together into a line. Her face was pale, and for the first time, I noticed the lines around her eyes.

"You are a good president," I whispered, gathering my skirts to crouch down next to her. I looked up at her, but Alice wouldn't meet my eyes. "You do your best for our people."

"Your daughter is right," Gaia said, her tone softer. "The events of late are not your fault. The problems in The Forge are not rooted here. There are other forces at work. However, now that I have seen the problems here, I don't think they can be ignored."

“You know nothing about life here,” Pearl spoke up. She stood, glaring at Gaia. “It’s none of your business. You should go back to your kingdom and fix your own problems.”

“Pearl,” Alice snapped. “That is impolite. Apologize to our guest. Gaia is as good as family here and is welcome to stay as long as she would like.” Alice nodded to Gaia. “I mean that—you are Ivy’s sister, and you should consider this your home.”

“You are very kind.” Gaia inclined her head.

Alice turned to glare at Pearl. “Pearl? Do you have something to say to Her Royal Highness?”

I could see by the stubborn set of Pearl’s jaw that this was not going to end well. She glared at Gaia.

“Pearl has had a very difficult couple of days,” I said to Gaia, trying to diffuse the attention, and the spotlight, from Pearl. “She was attacked by a Heart a few days ago.”

Pearl turned her glare on me. I shrugged at her.

“It’s true,” Alice said. “These Hearts have been terrorizing the city. Between them and the Pinnacle clock ticking again, people are afraid the late Queen is returning. People are barricading themselves in their houses, they’re enforcing the aesthetic standards more strictly—just in case the late Queen returns and punishes them. She was a tyrant.” Alice sighed. “Perhaps now isn’t the time for change. After everything that’s happened in Melfall recently, people are too afraid. Pearl is right—they would revolt.”

I shook my head. “There’s always an excuse not to change,” I started.

“There’s no need to change,” Pearl said, a little too loudly. Everyone looked up to see her glaring at all of us, two bright red spots on her cheeks, and her hands bunched into fists at her sides. “I don’t want to change. This is my home, and I like it just the way it is. Her Royal Highness,” Pearl sneered Gaia’s title, “says that most people in her kingdom are poor. Why should we strive to be like that? Life is perfect in Melfall, and everyone is beautiful and happy and has the time to do what they want. What’s wrong with that?” She crossed her arms across her chest, staring at me, then at Alice. She didn’t look at Gaia again.

I sighed. “Not everyone is beautiful and happy with the time to do whatever they want,” I said as I got to my feet and went over to stand in front of Pearl. I put my hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eye.

“You’re my sister, and I love you. But things can’t go on like this in The Forge.”

Pearl jerked away from me, glaring at me with anger sparkling in her eyes. “They could if you would just leave well enough alone.” She turned her back and marched out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

I stood, staring at the door for a moment before I turned back to look at Gaia and Alice. Alice stood, and Young Dinah mewled as she jumped from Alice’s lap. Alice gave Gaia an apologetic look.

“I’d better go after my daughter. She’s having a hard time—after suffering that nasty attack, and now finding out that Ivy isn’t her sister after all. It’s difficult for her. I’m sure she’ll come around.” These last words were directed at me. Alice gave my arm a squeeze as she stepped past me and out of the door.

I sighed, then looked back at Gaia. I shrugged my shoulders, trying to find a way to excuse Pearl’s behavior, to show my new sister that my old one was a good person, despite her apparent selfishness. Gaia smiled at me, patting the seat next to her.

“You are very different from your sister,” Gaia noted. “I was an only child growing up. I always wished for a sister.” She reached forward to take my hand. “I think you and I are alike—we see the way the world could be, and we want to help others. You see the problems in The Forge, and you want to make people’s lives better. Alice said that you work as her advisor and that you’re always suggesting ways to improve people’s lives.”

I sighed, remembering all of the times I’d tried to take suggestions to Alice, only to have her tell me she’s too busy to consider them.

“Perhaps I should have tried harder to make myself heard. My mother is a very busy woman. She doesn’t have time to implement change. She barely has time to keep The Forge functioning normally.”

“I don’t blame your mother. I know from watching my own parents how difficult it is to rule a kingdom. Still, something needs to be done for those poor people living in the tunnels. It’s not sustainable for a city to ignore the unbeautiful. People get old; they get sick; they have accidents. Some are simply not born with the good looks that will allow them to live on the aesthetic stipend. They cannot be ignored. This is their home, too—they deserve to live above ground, with dignity, to earn their living as they see fit.” Gaia looked at Genie, who had remained quiet during the whole exchange.

“What should be, and what is, are rarely the same,” he said in his low, quiet voice.

“Sometimes, our wishes come true,” Gaia reminded him.

Genie smiled at her, his eyes lighting up. They smiled at each other with undisguised affection. I wondered how I’d ever seen these two as anything but lovers. “Sometimes.”

I cleared my throat. “Fortunately, we’re not the only ones,” I remembered what Wit had said about Raven, about how he was leading a movement. I hesitated, remembering his inquiries about Alice’s whereabouts, and Chesh’s suspicions about the vampires kidnapping innocent people for their blood. Then I forced myself to go on. “I know of others who believe The Forge should change—must change—and they’ve started a movement.”

“A peaceful one, I hope,” Gaia replied.

I hope so, too, I thought.

30 AUGUST



“Can you at least confirm these people are Guild members?”

The man standing at the door to the Guild Hall stared down his nose at me. He stood at least a head taller than me and twice as broad, and he was dressed in a frock coat with the emblem of the United Guild embroidered into the lapel. His unimpressed expression had not changed as I’d approached him from the street, with the list of missing persons in my hand.

“Are you a Guild member, miss?”

I shook my head, suppressing a sigh.

The man cleared his throat. “Entry is restricted to Guild members and their invited guests,” he said, with as little expression as though he was reading directly from the rulebook. “Are you an invited guest?”

“No,” I replied. “As I said, I just want to speak to someone about a list of your members. It’s—”

“That information cannot be given out to the public.”

I waved the article about the missing persons—the one reporting Oscar Pankhurst’s disappearance—under his nose. “I’m simply trying to ascertain whether these missing people are Guild members.”

The man looked down at me once more, his expression, no more interested than before. “Are you a member of the city guard?”

“No,” I repeated. “But—”

“Then what business is it of yours to investigate Guild matters?”

“It’s not a Guild matter,” I said, my voice rising with exasperation despite my attempts to stay calm. “These people have gone missing!”

The man pulled at the sleeves of his coat, looking down his nose at me again.

“Then, I would advise you to take your concerns to the city guard and have them investigate.”

“But—”

He held up his hand to stop me speaking. “The city guard are the only ones with the jurisdiction to enter the Guild Hall without an invitation. Apart from the President herself, that is.”

My shoulders hunched, as a feeling of defeat washed over me. I didn’t want to trouble Alice with this until I knew there was something more to it than just a hunch. I sighed and turned away from the man at the doors without another word. As I moved slowly down the steps, the peal of the Pinnacle clock rang in the distance.

I tucked the article into my clutch and hurried down the steps, remembering my appointment with Gaia—I’d promised to take her out and show her some of the best places in the city. As I stepped back onto the street, I glanced back at the doorman. He stared over my head without acknowledging me at all.



“We need to make the people of The Forge aware of the cost of the aesthetic rules to those who cannot comply. We need them to see the unbeautiful in this city,” Gaia said, as she and I walked, arm in arm, down the wide Twelfth Avenue towards the wall. I’d taken her to my favorite teahouse, then she’d asked whether it would be possible to see a view of the city from the wall.

Twelfth Avenue was wide and clean. Steam carriages rolled through the streets, and people strolled the footpaths in hats and gloves, carrying parasols to shelter them from the glare of the midday sun.

As we’d walked past the large plate-glass windows that lined the avenue, we’d glanced into shops selling fashionable men’s and women’s clothes, hats, shoes, handbags, umbrellas, and other accessories. We’d passed several displays of gadgets and inventions—including an automatic kettle-pourer, a robotic butler, a self-ventilating hat with a fan on the front, a machine with footrests, and a chair that promised to exercise legs while

seated, a self-lacing corset, boots with springs to cushion the feet and lengthen the stride, a rack that removed hats and coats on entering through a front door. Gaia had exclaimed at them all, asking constant questions as we walked. Then, the conversation had eventually turned to the situation of the hidden citizens of Melfall.

“They’re frightened of the reception they’d get,” I said, remembering how Mr. Thackery ran from me when I’d approached him. “What if they’re arrested?”

“If their numbers are large enough, the officials can’t arrest them all,” Gaia replied, though she looked sideways at me and an uncomfortable feeling gnawed at my stomach.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled.

We walked past a beautiful couple, sharing a slice of cake at a small outdoor table on the avenue. They gazed at each other, obviously in love. Raven’s face flitted into my mind, the way he’d looked at me when I’d been at his house in his arms. I wished I could introduce him to my new sister. *Cappello’s Finest Hats* wasn’t far away. I could take Gaia there now and introduce them. But what if... Chesh’s suggestions about vampires kidnapping people for their blood sprang to mind again. I took a deep breath—I hadn’t seen Raven since that conversation with Chesh, and I felt uneasy. I didn’t think Chesh was right, but doubts lurked at the back of my mind.

Besides that, I wondered what Gaia would say if she knew that I was in love with a vampire. She was my sister, but we still barely knew each other. I didn’t know how she would react. I continued past the turnoff that would lead me to Raven’s shop, and a lump formed in my throat as I silently cursed myself for being so cowardly. I pushed memories of Raven from my mind and concentrated on the problem at hand. “Perhaps we could start a petition for Mother to reverse the aesthetic laws?”

“Would people sign it?” Gaia asked.

“The people in the tunnels would sign it.”

“Unless they’re afraid of putting their name on paper and of the reprisals that might come.”

“The biggest problem is that no one even knows they’re there,” I said. “Chesh didn’t believe they existed when I told him.”

“Would they believe a list of signatures?”

I sighed, and we walked in silence for a moment, before Gaia spoke again. “It’s a good idea,” Gaia said, “but I think we need some way of making the ordinary citizens of the city see what the aesthetic laws have done to people who can’t comply with them. They need to see, with their own eyes.” A line formed between Gaia’s eyes as she considered the problem. “What about a parade?”

I blinked, surprised at the suggestion. “A parade? Of whom?”

“The people hiding in the tunnels. The unseen, the unbeautiful. We need the people living here to acknowledge they exist—what better way than to march them through the city? We could take the march down this very avenue—then everyone in the shops and restaurants would see them. We could seek support along the way by asking onlookers to sign a petition.” Gaia smiled, her eyes dancing with excitement as she turned to me. “We could go all the way to the President’s Palace and present the petition to Alice.”

I tried to picture the scene of the people in the tunnels coming out of hiding to march through the most populated parts of the city.

“It could work, I suppose,” I said, doubtfully, wondering what reaction they’d get from the beautiful citizens who lined the avenues to be seen at their best. What was the worst that could happen? “If we can get them to come. I certainly don’t have any better ideas.”



“We could start the march here,” I pointed to a spot on the map. “Then we could march down Twelfth Avenue, through the market place, and along Sixth Avenue to end up at the gates of the President’s Palace. We could publicly present a list of demands to Mother about changing the aesthetic laws.”

Gaia and I pored over the maps in the President’s library. She was nodding. “When shall we do it?”

I shrugged. “As soon as we can, I think. No time like the present.”

“Give your mother some warning. No leader likes to be taken by surprise. She certainly won’t expect a crowd of unbeautiful at her gates demanding changes to the laws.”

I nodded straightening. “I’ll speak to her.”

“We will also need to—”

“Mother? Ivy? Where are you?”

Pearl’s voice wafted through the door to the library. I stepped away from the maps and opened the door to step out into the hallway. Black and white tiles arranged in a checked pattern along the floor, and a large staircase curled up around the walls to a mezzanine landing on the next floor. The banister was carved with cats—sitting, lying down, walking, pouncing, and watching. A grand painting of a younger Alice, when she was first sworn in as President, with her old cat, Dinah, in her arms.

At the far end of the hallway, Pearl was standing with her back to us. In one hand she held a parasol, and there was a light shawl around her shoulders, as though she’d just come in from outside. Her other arm was looped through that of a young man with a familiar figure. My eyes widened.

On the mezzanine level, a door opened upstairs, and Alice appeared on the upstairs landing, wearing a lace-trimmed dress in her favorite color—blue. Her blonde hair was pulled back from her face, and the glasses perched on her nose suggested she’d been working.

“What have I told you about yelling through the house?” she said, a note of irritation in her voice. Her shoes clicked the tiles as she started down the stairs, one hand sliding down the banister as she went. “What is it, Pearl?” she asked. “Are you well?”

Pearl turned around. As she did so, she dropped the arm that was linked to the young man, only to grasp it again when she’d spun around. She was beaming. I found myself smiling in response to the look on her face.

Then her eyes drifted to the young man on her right, and the smile fell from my face.

Pearl beamed up at Chesh, who patted her hand as it rested in the crook of his elbow. He glanced at me, sideways, but didn’t meet my eye. I took a step backward, putting up a hand to rest it on the wall.

“We’re absolutely wonderful,” Pearl replied. “Aren’t we, my darling?”

I stared at Chesh. He’d never shown any interest in my twin sister before—had he?

“Of course,” Chesh replied. “It’s a marvelous day, and I have one of the most beautiful women in The Forge on my arm, what could be better?” His eyes darted toward me again, and I could have sworn I saw a tint of pink color his cheeks.

“Mr. Cheshire?” Alice looked confused, staring at the couple in front of her, before casting a glance at me. She descended the last steps to come to stand in the hallway. I crossed my arms across my chest, then dropped them at my sides, before fiddling with my hair with one hand. I couldn’t stand still. I couldn’t meet the eyes of anyone in the hall.

“What a pleasant surprise,” Alice continued.

“Chet and I have been on the loveliest outing,” Pearl said, and as she did so, she flicked her fan open. “He took me to the most enchanting teahouse, and later this evening, he’ll be taking me to the theatre to see the latest production of *Behind the Looking-glass*.”

“The theatre?” I said, almost choking on the words. I glared at Chesh. “You don’t like the theatre.”

Chesh turned a deeper shade of pink, but it didn’t seem like Pearl had even heard me. Alice wrung her hands, looking at me, then to Pearl, as though she couldn’t decide whether to be happy or upset by this turn of events.

“This afternoon, Chet showed me his latest invention. He’s so clever! You never told me how clever he is, Ivy,” Pearl gushed.

I felt the words like a punch to the stomach. He was going to show Pearl his latest invention? He’d always shown me his inventions before anyone else. This hurt more than all of the disagreements we’d had over the last couple of weeks.

Chesh dropped his eyes to the floor, turning his face away from me. I clenched my fists and straightened my shoulders. Alice gave me a look of pity.

“I hope you have a lovely time,” I said, clipping my words as I spoke. “I’m spending the evening with my sister.”

This time Pearl did hear me. Her smile wavered, and I saw a sudden look of confusion in her eyes, as though she was lost. Then she fixed her eyes on Chesh again and patted his arm.

“I’ll need time to change, of course,” Pearl said.

Chesh dipped his head, then lifted her hand to brush a kiss over her knuckles. “I shall also change. I would not wish to shame you by appearing at the theatre in my day clothes. I will call again in a couple of hours. Until then, my love.” Chesh bowed.

Pearl beamed at him again. She dipped a curtsy and fluttered her fan as she looked at him from under her long eyelashes. She was the picture of

beauty, of a young woman in love.

Chesh turned to acknowledge Alice, then his eyes flickered towards me again. I glared at him. He cleared his throat, put his hat on his head, and turned to leave, his shoes rapping on the polished floor as he walked.

When the butler closed the door behind Chesh, Pearl spun in a little circle and squealed. “Isn’t he wonderful?” she said, though she spoke to no one in particular. Without waiting for an answer, she ran up the stairs to her dressing room.

“Ivy?” Alice asked when Pearl’s door closed behind her. “Are you alright?” She took a step toward me.

I started to shake my head. Gaia stepped out from behind me, and I saw her figure in the corner of my eye. She put a hand out to rest lightly on my arm. When I turned to her, I saw concern in her eyes, but there was a soft smile on her face too.

“I am very pleased to be spending the evening with you, too, sister.”

A lump rose to my throat, and I took her hand and squeezed it.



I undid the buttons on my vest, shrugged it off, and threw it over the window seat, then stepped out of my skirts. Wearing only my underclothes, I flopped down on my bed, staring up at the curtains draped over the four posts of the canopy. The folds of the light material fluttered in the warm evening breeze coming in from the open shutters. I let my eyes blur, focusing on nothing, as my mind turned inward, ruminating on the events of the day.

Gaia and I had talked and planned during the afternoon and into the early evening, but I’d kept my eye on the carved clock on the mantle in the dining room. When I knew the theatre would be coming out, I made my excuses to retreat to my bedroom. I didn’t want to be downstairs when Chesh and Pearl returned. I didn’t want to hear about their evening together.

There was a sour taste in my mouth as I deliberately pushed aside thoughts of my twin and my best friend. Instead, I considered the proposal that Gaia and I had worked on over dinner. Alice hadn’t joined us, as she’d taken dinner in her office, but it had given Gaia and me time to work on the details of the proposal that we would put to Alice when it was ready.

We would need not only Alice's blessing, but the march also relied on Raven's support, or I didn't think we would get the people in the tunnels to show their faces. My mind turned to the dark-haired man who haunted both my dreams and also most of my waking thoughts. I still hadn't returned to see Raven since the night of our kiss. My fingers absent-mindedly brushed over my lips. I took a deep breath and lay my palm over my forehead and the other hand on my stomach.

I'd told Raven that I would come to see him again, but that was days ago. Why hadn't I gone back to see him? I told myself that I'd been busy, and it was true. Since I'd last seen Raven, I'd discovered a sister and a past that I never knew I had. Still, deep down, I knew it wasn't just that. Chesh's accusations about Raven and the vampires being responsible for the people who had gone missing had affected me, nagging at me every time my mind turned to Raven. I couldn't deny that the circumstances fit the explanation.

If I faced Raven, I'd have to confront him with my doubts. Deep down, I didn't want to know the truth, just in case, Chesh was right. Then what would I do? My head said I would have to turn him over to the authorities. My heart refused to believe it.

I closed my eyes, trying to quiet my thoughts, with little success.

A sudden rapping on wood made me sit directly upright in bed. There was a shadow at the window sill against the inky night sky. Raven's pale face shone in the moonlight, staring at me, unsmiling.

"Ivy?" he said, his voice was deep and throaty as he uttered my name. My breath caught in my chest. I hastily grabbed a robe and pulled it around myself.

"Raven," I replied, standing next to the bed, one hand on the nearest post. Drawn to him, I held onto the bedpost like an anchor to stop my feelings from betraying my reason.

Raven smiled but didn't make any attempt to come inside. There was a hesitant smile on his face, as though he wasn't confident of his reception. I took another step forward.

"What are you doing here?"

Raven cleared his throat. "I'd hoped you would come to me," he admitted. "The days were endless without you. When night fell tonight, and still you didn't come, I decided I couldn't wait any longer."

I nodded, then cocked my head to the side. "Why are you on the window sill? Why didn't you come to the door?"

Raven shrugged. "I saw the light in the window. I sensed you in here from below. I didn't want to wake the household. Honestly, I didn't know whether you'd told your family about me." He raised an eyebrow, and my cheeks warmed.

I waited for him to move into the room, but he remained perched on the sill. "Are you coming in?"

This time it was Raven's turn to blush. He cleared his throat. "You need to invite me first," he replied. "Vampire, remember?"

My eyes widened slightly. "Of course, please..." I gestured for him to enter.

Raven shook his head. "It's not enough. You need to say it."

I cleared my throat. "Please come in, Mr. Cappello." There was a smile on my face as he entered, and my heart skipped as he stepped inside.

He held his hands behind his back, and as he stepped toward me, he brought out a hat. A molded felt bowler hat, with a large ribbon and flower detail tied around the base, flowing into a ribbon and lace train falling down my back.

He touched me, a brief touch under my chin with one finger to lift my face towards his. He studied my profile with a studious expression.

Several moments passed, then he pursed his lips and whipped the hat from my head. "No, not that one, either." Raven sighed. "You continue to elude me, Miss Rowntree."

I smirked at him. "Have you ever had such a complicated customer?"

Raven raised one eyebrow. "Not one so complicated," He gently took my hand in his and raised my knuckles to his lips. "Nor so beautiful."

"You tease me, Mr. Cappello," I said, but I squeezed his fingers, enjoying his attention. A smile spread across his face, and he let the hat fall to the floor. He reached for my other hand and held them both in front of his chest, as though pleading with me.

"Tell me," Raven whispered. "Why didn't you come back? I've done nothing but think about you. Did you think about me?"

A lump formed in my throat. "Yes," I whispered.

"So, why didn't you come?"

A flush spread over me, and I pulled my hands away from Raven's grip. He let them go without protest.

"Tell me."

I took a deep breath. “I... heard reports about people who have been going missing in Melfall. I didn’t think... but the timing...” I pressed my lips together, then put a hand to my flaming cheeks.

There was a moment of silence. “You think I’m responsible for those missing?”

I swallowed.

“You think I drank their blood? Killed them?” Raven didn’t raise his voice. His eyes became sad, and part of him retreated from me, although he didn’t move at all.

I waited, hanging on his response, but Raven didn’t say anything. He just looked mournful.

“Did you?” I whispered; the words escaped my lips before I could bite them back. “Or...maybe... one of the other vampires?”

“Does it matter?” Raven whispered. “You think I’m a monster.”

I started shaking my head. “I don’t think you are a monster,” I said, then I steeled myself for what I needed to ask, taking a deep breath. “I saw you with a vial of blood. Black market blood. You didn’t get it from the blood banks. So...”

Raven looked down at his hands. “You think I got it from those people who went missing?” He turned away from me then and went to stand by the window, looking out over the rooftops of the city and the stars in the night sky. In the distance, I could see the face of the Pinnacle clock standing proud and tall in the center of the city. In the silence, I heard it ticking, like a heartbeat.

“I tell you truly—I don’t know what happened to them, though I am as worried as you are. Do you believe me?”

The lump in my throat persisted for another moment, but as I saw the pain on his face, the doubts drained away, and a sense of relief lifted the load off my shoulders. I nodded.

“When did you see me with a vial of blood?”

“At the apothecary. It was before that night I followed you.”

Raven nodded. “I can explain that. Why don’t we sit?” He motioned with his hand, making a motion for me to sit on the bed. I looked at it, but it felt too intimate to sit on the bed with Raven in my room. I walked over to the small work table instead.

Raven noticed it for the first time. “What is this?”

I looked down at the tiny wheels, springs, and gears spread across the table. "I'm making a pocket watch for my new sister."

Raven frowned. "You have a new sister?"

I laughed. "Yes." I slipped my magnifying goggles onto my face and picked up the work I had done so far. "Look," I laid it out on my hand. When I looked up at Raven, his eyes seemed really large as they stared at me. "Sorry," I said, and pulled the goggles off again.

Raven shook his head. "No, keep going. In fact, keep working on that watch. I'll tell you why I had a vial of blood, but do you have a sheet of paper?"

I got up from my seat and brought him a slip of paper. "What for?"

"If I tell you, it will ruin the surprise."

"I don't understand," I said, still standing as Raven took the leaf of paper from my hands.

"You will. Sit there," he instructed.

I sat down at the dressing table that functioned as a workbench and picked up the half-made pocket watch again.

"As you know, I help Dr. Lapin find patients so he can heal the ill and injured in Melfall," Raven started talking. He glanced at me, then leaned the paper against the wall and started making markings with some quick strokes. His eyes darted from me to the paper, then back again.

I stared, noticing the look of concentration on his face as he sketched something I could not see. I leaned forward, craning for a view of the picture. When he noticed me looking, he wagged a finger at me, then pointed to my workbench. I suppressed a smile, then pulled my goggles over my eyes again and stared at the parts scattered over my bench, trying not to be distracted by the vampire on my window seat.

"Dr. Lapin is kind enough to charge people only what they can afford to pay," Raven said, still drawing. "Unfortunately, most of the people he treats cannot afford to pay anything for his services. Dr. Lapin doesn't lead a lavish lifestyle, but he would find himself as destitute as those people dwelling in the tunnels if he didn't find a way to earn an income."

I frowned. "He mentioned that his wealthier clients were not willing to be treated by him when he treated the poor alongside them."

Raven nodded, glancing at me again, then turning his attention back to his sketch. "He no longer keeps the rooms where he used to treat his old clients. It became too expensive. I had been working with Dr. Lapin for

some time when the blood banks stopped supplying Melfall's vampires with blood to quench their appetites."

"As soon as I knew what was happening, I feared for my kind. If they couldn't quench their thirst legally, I knew it would only be a matter of time before people would start dying. Then, no amount of money would keep us from the citizens' vengeance. There is little enough goodwill between the vampires and humans in this city."

"With the number of people going missing, some people have leaped to that conclusion already," I interrupted, thinking of Chesh.

Raven nodded. "I feared as much." He leaned back, holding his sketch up to the light of the candle.

"Are you going to show me now?" I asked, looking up at him.

Raven shook his head, tucking the piece of paper into an inside pocket of his coat. "I will show you the finished product."

"A hat?" I asked.

"You shall see," Raven replied. He sat on the window seat, leaning back against the windowsill. The pallor of his skin contrasted with the darkness of the night sky outside. "Now, I was telling you about the blood trade. When I found out about our supply problem, I worried about it for a few days, before seeking out Dr. Lapin. I proposed a trade for his clients who could not pay his bills in coin."

I fixed one of the small wheels into place with a set of tweezers. It was such fiddly work. When I was done, I looked up at Raven again, and his face bulged with the effect of the magnification of the goggles.

"And that was?"

"I knew vampires would pay for fresh blood. I also knew Dr. Lapin's clients couldn't pay for the treatment they were provided. I asked Dr. Lapin to set up a trade—their blood as payment for his services. The vampires then paid him for the blood. I deliver the product and provide payment to Dr. Lapin."

"Does that make Dr. Lapin's patients sick?" I asked, feeling as though this situation was slightly unethical.

"Dr. Lapin takes blood from a patient once they've recovered, or from a willing family member," Raven replied.

"Are Dr. Lapin's patients happy for their blood to be used in this way?" I asked, still feeling uneasy.

“Actually, yes,” Raven said, though he seemed a little surprised himself. “Apart from the needle used to draw the blood from their bodies, they do not seem to notice the small amount of blood that Dr. Lapin takes from them. In fact, they are pleased to have a way to repay Dr. Lapin for his services. You might be surprised, but most people—even the poor—would prefer to pay their way, rather than take charity from someone else.”

“Everybody benefits,” I murmured, setting my tools down on the table again. I removed my goggles and set them down too. Then I got up and went over to sit next to Raven on the window seat. I sat close to him—so close that our knees were almost touching, but not quite.

A sudden energy buzzed between us, a sort of magnetism calling our bodies together.

Raven looked sideways at me. “Did you really think I had killed those missing people?”

I shook my head. “No, but when Chesh suggested it, I couldn’t get the idea out of my mind.”

“Mr. Cheshire Jr.? Your friend?”

I nodded.

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding me?” Raven frowned.

I hesitated, then looked up at Raven. “Not the only reason, but... yes, I suppose so.”

“What was the other reason?”

I brightened, the smile coming unbidden to my face once more. “I discovered I have a new sister.”

“The president is pregnant?” Raven asked, his eyes widening in surprise.

“No.” I laughed as I shook my head. “As it turns out, Mother is not my mother—not really. Pearl is not my real sister, either. A woman—a princess—arrived here a few days ago. Her name is Gaia, and she’s my biological sister. We’ve spent some time getting to know each other over the last few days.”

“And?”

I looked down at my hands, clasped in my lap, and smiled. “We have a lot in common.”

Raven smiled, gently taking my hand. “You both make pocket watches?” he guessed.

I shook my head. “No, but we’re both troubled by the fate of the people in the tunnels. We want to help them. We’ve decided to organize a march, to force the people in this city to see the people who are living in hiding in the tunnels, and to petition Mother to change the aesthetic laws.”

“A march? Through the city?”

I nodded, twisting my body around to face him. “I was going to come to see you about it, actually. I need your help convincing the people to march. Do you think they’ll do it?”

The excitement of the idea bubbled inside of me again, but Raven didn’t seem to share my enthusiasm.

The smile slipped from my face. “Don’t you like the idea?”

Raven put his hands in his pockets. “Do you really think it’s necessary? Why can’t we just speak to the President? Surely we can petition her for changes without the need for a march?”

“What’s wrong with a march?”

“Your mother could change the laws without a march.”

“People in the city don’t believe the people in the tunnels exist. A march would—”

“These people have been forced out of the public eye. They have been ridiculed enough.” Raven was shaking his head. “Making them march... Don’t you think it will be like putting them on display as though they’re curiosities to be stared at? They’ll be jeered at, mocked, maybe even stoned. This city is their home, they should be able to enjoy it like every other citizen. That’s why the President must change the laws.”

I sighed, closing my eyes. “Mother can’t just change the laws on a whim.”

“Why not?”

“She’s not the queen.”

“She’s the ruler of The Forge. If you asked her—”

“Mother needs to see the people in the tunnels for herself,” I interrupted.

“If we spoke to her, told her about them, then she’d know. If you don’t want to be the one to tell her, then let me. I’m not afraid to tell her the truth about what is really going on in Melfall.”

I pulled my goggles off my face and crossed my arms across my chest. I remembered Wit said Raven had been looking for me, even before he’d left that card for me at *The Tea Party*.

“Is that the reason you’re here? So that I will introduce you to my mother?” I glared.

Raven froze, a guilty look passing over his face.

My stomach dropped, and my cheeks blushed, red and hot. Raven held up his hands as though in surrender.

“At first—yes, that’s why I left my card at your table. I wanted to find a way in to speak to the president, to find a way to plead for the people living underground.” Raven gave his head a little shake. “Then I got to know you, and you surprised me. That’s why I’m here—to be with you. But the people living in the tunnels still need help. The President could change their lives with a word.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to help, but I know it won’t work.”

“But—”

“Mother is afraid the people will revolt against her. When she first became president, The Forge was in chaos. Recently, with the people’s concerns about the Hearts and the rumors of the return of the Queen, the chaos is again bubbling just below the surface. The aesthetic laws are entrenched, and many people earn their living from the aesthetic stipend. Mother is afraid that if she changes the aesthetic laws, people will move against her. She doesn’t want to disrupt the peace in Melfall.”

“The people hiding in those tunnels are her people too, whether she likes it or not.”

I sighed. “I know that, but Mother doesn’t. If she *sees* them for herself, she will feel differently; I’m sure.”

Raven stared at the other side of the room. By the small wrinkle above the ridge of his nose, between his eyes, I could tell he was thinking. After several moments of silence, he nodded. He stepped over me and took my hands, squeezing.

“Perhaps you’re right. The people have been hidden for too long. Out of sight, out of mind—as the saying goes. Still, the idea of a march makes me uneasy.”

A familiar laugh wafted through the open window from outside the front entrance below.

Raven raised an eyebrow.

“It’s Pearl,” I replied. With Raven sitting next to me, I was less troubled about the idea of Pearl and Chesh enjoying each other’s company as a couple. “She went out to dinner and the—”

Raven froze, then his eyes widened, and a small smile appeared on his lips.

“Dinner,” Raven echoed. His smile broadened as he turned to me, taking my face in his hands and pulling me forward for a quick kiss. “That’s it!”

I blinked at him, part of me wondering what he was talking about, while the other part relished the jubilant look on his face. His eyes danced, and he smiled wider than I’d ever seen.

“What is it?” I asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Forget the march,” he answered. “I’ve got a better idea.”

31 AUGUST



I put the pen back into its holder and blotted the paper. I'd finished writing my report on the blood banks that Alice had requested. Still, it felt unfinished. Someone was taking all the donated blood, but I hadn't found out who it was or why they were doing it.

My nerves jingled at the promise of the night ahead. I stood abruptly, unable to sit still, and paced around my bedroom. I couldn't stay here all day, fussing over my hair and clothes and preparing for the night ahead. The wait would drive me crazy.

Perhaps, I had time for one last attempt at finishing my report properly.



I crouched at the base of a nondescript wooden fence near the gate where I'd seen the carriage enter with the day's stock of blood. There was nothing special about it at all, neither the fence nor the gate—the two were held together by old nails and a rusty latch.

The sun beat down overhead, and I repositioned my hat to provide some shade over my face. It would be hours before the carriage came past again, but I would need to be home by then to meet Raven.

There was only one thing for it.

I looked left and right, then, seeing nothing, stepped up to the fence and stood on my tip-toes. The fence was too high, and I couldn't see over it.

I reached up, straining to get my fingertips over the edge of it. I was just a stretch away from getting a grip. I jumped, getting a hand on the top of

the fence, but couldn't hold on, coming away with a painful splinter in my forefinger.

I sucked on my finger as I examined the gate. I tried to force it open--the latch was rusty but unfortunately, solid. It held fast.

I heard people moving around inside and took several steps backward to conceal myself behind the fence again.

I squeezed my hands into fists, frustrated at being so close but unable to find out what was happening on the other side. I crouched down, gathering my skirts, and crawled along the bottom of the fence to see if I could pry a board loose. I tested them, pulling at them, one by one.

Finally, about halfway along, I found a rotten board and pulled with all of my strength.

With a creaking and cracking sound, the plank broke away.

I froze, certain that someone must have heard me. Pressing my back against the fence, I didn't dare even to breathe. I waited for the cry of discovery.

It didn't come.

Finally, I couldn't hold my breath any longer. I sucked in several lungfuls of air, then crouched down again and peeped through the gap I'd made in the fence.

A stack of crates towered on the other side of the fence, and I couldn't see past it.

I paused a moment, then unpinned my hat and shrugged off my jacket, leaving both in a pile outside the fence. Without dwelling on the grass and mud stains I would surely get on my shirt and skirts, I lay flat on my stomach and wiggled through the gap.

The jagged wood scraped down my back, but my shirt took most of the damage. On the other side, there was barely any room, but I managed to crawl into a squat to peek into one of the crates.

I frowned. The crates looked exactly the same on the outside as those that had stored the blood in the blood banks. On this inside, though, there was no blood.

A jumble of cogs, gears and other metal parts, all crowded together like scraps.

I looked around. There were crates stacked all over the small area that stretched between the fence, the driveway, and a wooden building. It didn't

have enough windows for a residence, but from the look of the smoke billowing from the chimney, it could be a blacksmith's forge.

I scooted around the crates, edging closer. A door opened, and somebody went inside. Through the open door, I glimpsed the white-orange glow of heated metal.

I crept closer, cautiously, keeping my eyes on the inside of the shed, moving from one stack of crates to the next.

The squeal of ungreased metal rang out, and I dropped to the ground, panting. It was the sound of the gate opening.

A steam carriage came through the gates and stopped on the driveway, near the open door. The carriage door swung open, and a figure stepped out, closely followed by another, identical to the first.

I didn't need to go any closer to recognize them. The Tweedles.

Then someone else was bundled out of the carriage. A man stumbled, blindfolded, before being pushed roughly into the shed.

I inched forward to get a better look, but a shout brought the Tweedles directly back out again.

Someone came running up the driveways, holding something.

My hat and jacket.

Instantly, the Tweedles started issuing orders, and several people appeared from inside the building, spreading out to search around the stacked crates.

I gasped, then started crawling away, keeping low to the ground. I retraced my steps to flee back to the hole in the fence and dove underneath.

The sharp edges of the wood scratched my back as I pulled myself back into the lane, then pushed to my feet and started running.



The street lamp ignited with a hiss, casting a glow over the lamplighter's face as I walked past. In this part of the city, the lamps looked like phoenixes who rose every night in the fire, only to be extinguished again at dawn. I stared up at the majestic bird wrought in glass, the flame dancing inside it. The lamplighter stepped down from his ladder, tipped his hat to me, then swung his ladder over his shoulder to move along to the next lamp on the street.

I waited for him to move along, then swung open the wrought iron gate, and took the steps to the door two at a time. The lamplighter didn't look back as he lit the next lamp on the street. I raised the knocker, in the shape of a top hat, and let it land on the door with a sound that pierced the fading light.

Since two raps were customary in the city, the signal was a single knock. Inside there was a pause before the door opened.

Raven answered the door, pulling it open only enough to show his face. He raised an eyebrow with a smirk. The door wasn't opened wide enough to admit me, and I raised my eyebrow back at him playfully, then rolled my eyes.

"You really need me to say the password?"

"Security is of utmost importance. How am I to know whether you are sympathetic to our cause or an agent of the city trying to worm your way into our secret gathering?" The smirk on his face increased. I struggled to keep a straight face.

"A toast to the Mad Hatter, sir," I said.

Raven chuckled as he swung the door wide. "The Mad Hatter?"

"Well, it was you who came up with this mad plan to begin with," I replied, stepping inside the entry. Raven closed the door behind me.

"The princess and her companion have already arrived. They appear to have sourced every map of the city and have laid them all over my dining room table."

I paused in the entry hall and removed my hat and coat. Raven took them both from me and hung them in the hall closet. "How many are we expecting tonight?"

Raven shrugged. "Not many. I invited Dr. Lapin as he'll be able to spread the word to many of his patients very easily. His niece—you remember Miss Lapin?—will be along when she closes up the shop."

"Well, let's hope we have some more with us tomorrow when the real action starts. Otherwise, it might be somewhat of a letdown," I said. As Raven closed the hall closet, I made to move with him through to where Gaia and Genie were in the dining room. Raven took my arm to stop me.

I looked up at him as he pulled me closer. "Before we greet the others," he whispered before brushing his lips against mine. "I want you to myself—just for a moment."

I rested my hands on the front of his pinstriped vest and raised up on my toes to return his kiss. Our kiss deepened, and Raven wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me closer until we were pressed against each other, breathing hard.

I let my hand slip up to brush over his shoulder and up his neck to curl in the softness of his hair.

“Ivy,” Raven pulled away from me just enough to breathe my name. “I have done nothing but think about you—about kissing you—all day.” He pulled back a little further to look deeply into my eyes. “I have counted the seconds until you would rejoin me.”

“Me too,” I whispered, pulling at his neck until he bent down to kiss me again.

“It really is quite inconvenient,” he continued. “I ought to have been thinking about a great many other things, and you quite distracted me.”

“Would you rather I leave?” I said as I drew a breath.

In answer, Raven tugged me closer to him and kissed me on the soft skin under my ear.

The rap at the door echoed through the hallway. We both pulled apart, looking up at each other with wide eyes. We waited for a second knock, but it didn’t come.

Raven pulled away, motioning for me to wait. He went over to the door and opened it just enough to see who was standing on the doorstep.

“Yes?” he asked.

“A toast to the white rabbit, sir,” chorused a number of deep voices. It was a clever password, as it called out the person who had invited them to come. These men had been sent here by Wit.

Raven looked back at me, both eyebrows raised as he opened the door. I saw a group of about six men, dressed in worn suits and scruffy flat caps. Raven ushered them inside before closing the door behind them. One of the men brandished a baton, bringing it down on his palm with a slapping sound. I noticed the others were all carrying batons with them. I took a big step back.

“We’re ready,” the man said, and the others nodded enthusiastically.

Raven looked at me. “What did Dr. Lapin tell you, exactly?” he asked.

“That it’s time to change the city. That other like-minded people were planning something. We’re tired of living like rats, taking whatever scraps we can get. We want to fight.”

Raven edged around the group so that he was standing in front of me. He held out his hands. "We have no plan to fight," he said.

The men looked at each other. The leader let his baton fall to his side. "But Dr. Lapin said..." He frowned as though he was trying to remember Wit's exact words. "He said we had to stand up for ourselves. We're ready."

Raven nodded. "We are going to stand up for ourselves," he said. "Though there will be no violence."

The men looked at each other. The leader gave a grudging nod, and they agreed to leave their batons with their coats and hats at the door.

Raven escorted us all to the dining room where Gaia and Genie were standing, hand in hand, as they pored over the maps. Gaia's phoenix, with its exquisite plumage, was perched on Gaia's shoulder, as though reading the maps too. Next to her, Genie stared at Gaia with an incredulous look on his face, as though he couldn't believe she was standing next to him. As we entered the room, Gaia looked up at him and caught Genie staring at her with a smile on his face. Her serious expression softened, and her eyes lit up as she matched his smile with one of her own.

Then she noticed us, and her attention shifted, her expression back to serious again.

"You're here!" Gaia stepped around the table and came over to take my hands and kiss me on the cheek. "And you have brought...others?"

"Dr. Lapin sent these men to join our cause," Raven replied.

Gaia smiled at them as they shuffled inside the room to come to stand with their backs to the wall, staring around with wide eyes, looking uncomfortable. Gaia turned back to her maps on the dining table, dragging me across the room with her.

"For the most effect," she said without preamble, "we will need to have a presence in every precinct of the city. There are so many. How many do you think will come?"

I eyed the six men standing around the wall. "It's hard to say," I replied.

Another single knock echoed from the hallway, and Raven hurried back to the door.

"How many will we need?" I asked her.

"More than this," Gaia replied, eyeing the six men. She straightened and addressed them. "Do you men have wives or girlfriends? Will they be joining you tomorrow?"

The men exchanged looks. Finally, the man who seemed to be their leader responded. “The vampire said there would be no bloodshed,” he replied.

Gaia nodded her head. “On the contrary, I’m hoping it will be fun.”

The men stared at her, confused, then exchanged looks again. Before anyone could say anything else, the door opened, and more people shuffled into the room. More than twenty more people entered, both men and women—all thin, some scarred by pox, some missing a hand or a finger, one with an eye-patch, all dressed in little more than rags. I raised myself onto my tiptoes to see Raven, but the people kept coming in.

Finally, Raven appeared, with Wit by his side. The large dining room was half-full of people, who stood silently, looking wide-eyed about as though waiting for something to happen.

Raven and Dr. Lapin pushed their way over to where Gaia, Genie, and I stood at the table.

“This is more than I expected,” Raven muttered.

“They are eager to improve their circumstances,” Dr. Lapin replied. “They’ve nothing left to lose.”

“We don’t plan for violence,” I said in a low voice so that only they could hear. “I hope you have explained that.”

“Peaceful protest,” Dr. Lapin replied. “Even better. I hope that I will not need to patch up too many of them after the night is over.” He turned to Raven. “Are the vampires with us?”

Raven gave a small nod. “I can’t speak for all of them, but a great many will stand with those who have been kind enough to donate blood in their time of thirst.”

“Do you think it will be enough?” I asked Gaia.

She looked down at her maps. “There is an area in each district, at least. We need people in each one...” She was about to say something else when the knocker sounded again.

I looked at Raven. “More?”

He looked at the table spread with platters of sandwiches, scones, and pastries. Many of those who had just arrived were eyeing the food hungrily. Raven shrugged his shoulders. “I believed we’d over-catered. I might have been wrong.”



I stood with Raven at the door as everyone filed out of the door, collecting their threadbare coats and hats as they left. Gaia stood with us, clasping the hand of each person who came by and thanking them.

“I look forward to seeing you tomorrow,” she said, making eye contact with each one.

I followed her lead, nodding to them as they passed me. “Do you remember your places for tomorrow?” I asked. The people nodded their heads and murmured their thanks. Many had stuffed their pockets with food to take back to hungry families—I couldn’t begrudge them. In fact, we’d made sure all the food went home with someone. There should be no leftovers when people were starving. I knew that many of them had eaten more this evening than they would have had for days.

The meeting had become far larger than we’d planned, with more than one hundred people arriving at Raven’s house to pledge their support for the plans.

Gaia, Genie, Raven, and I had quickly split up to speak to each of the small groups, in turn, assigning them to a different district of the city and giving them detailed instructions for the next day.

When the last of the guests had left, Genie was helping Gaia with her coat. As they were about to step out of the door together, Gaia turned to me to draw me into a hug.

“I think this is going to work,” she said, and there was a twinkle in her eye.

I took a deep breath, an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach.

“You will speak to your mother, won’t you?” she asked. “We will need her support if we’re going to be successful. Don’t surprise her with it.”

I nodded. She leaned forward and kissed my cheek again. I squeezed her hands in return.

“I shall see you tomorrow,” I said, then Gaia and Genie were out of the door.

Raven took out my coat and hat from the hall closet. “It’s late. I shall walk you home,” he said, tucking my arm into the crook of his elbow.

I leaned close to him as we walked down his front steps. “Do you think it’s going to work?”

“It will all hinge on whether the president will lend us her support,” Raven said. “If not...”

“I know. I will speak with her tomorrow,” I murmured. As we stepped onto the street, I noticed the ticking of the Pinnacle Clock.

“Is that clock louder than usual?” I asked him. Raven frowned, tilting his head to the side as though he could hear something I couldn’t.

In front of us, I saw Gaia’s gown flutter as she and Genie rounded the corner. In the other direction, other smaller groups of people were also hurrying home in the dark. From this distance, I wasn’t sure whether they were the same people who had come to our meeting at Raven’s house, or if they were just people who were walking home from dinner or other amusements.

The wrought-iron gate squeaked as it swung open, and Raven covered my hand as it rested in the crook of his elbow, with his own.

“We should hurry,” he said, looking one direction down the street, then the other.

Someone screamed. Raven and I started running. Around a corner, a figure lay on the ground—one of those who’d been at Raven’s house only a quarter-hour earlier. In the distance, the echoed footsteps of a marching Heart disappeared into the darkness.

1 SEPTEMBER



I paced a track in the carpet of my room next to my four-poster bed. I hadn't drawn the curtains on my window, and outside, above the tiled rooftops, the sky was spread with pinks and purples. A sense of excitement boiled inside of me. Tonight was the night—either we would succeed or we wouldn't.

There was a gentle rap at the door before I heard the deep tones of Mr. Hopewell, Alice's butler, announcing that Mr. Cappello and his companions had arrived.

Companions?

I spun in a half-circle and took one last look in the mirror. I'd curled waves in my platinum blonde hair and dabbed my lips with gloss for the occasion, but now looking at myself in the mirror, I wondered whether it was too much. I smoothed a hand over the lines of my fitted vest and pulled nervously at the cuffs off my billowing shirt.

Then I shook my head. *You look great*, I told my reflection sternly. *Tonight is not about you. It's about the people in the tunnels. Do it for them.*

"Miss Rowntree?" Mr. Hopewell knocked again. "Are you there?"

"Yes, coming," I replied, then took a deep breath. I turned to the door and wrenched it open. Mr. Hopewell drew back, a look of surprise on his face. Then, he fixed his features back into his usual pleasant expression. He motioned for me to follow him, and I heard my skirts swish as I stepped into the hallway to follow him.

Mr. Hopewell's posture was erect and proper, as always, but I didn't miss the slight raising of his eyebrows when I'd opened the door. My heart galloped in my chest as I followed, beating so loud that I was sure Mr.

Hopewell could hear it from where he walked in front of me. I only hoped Raven would appreciate my efforts in preparation for this evening, too.

My shoes clicked on the tiles, and I gripped the railing as I took a first step down the curving staircase that led down to the entry hall.

Raven looked up at me as I came down the stairs. He was holding a top hat in his hands and struck a dashing figure in a purple tailcoat trimmed with silver. His eyes widened a fraction, then a look of joy spread across his face. A smile touched one edge of his lips, slowly pulling the rest of his mouth to follow. My heart skipped a beat, and I felt my own expression mirror his until I was grinning so hard my face hurt.

Mr. Hopewell cleared his throat. I was standing halfway down the stairs, gripping the banister. I almost tripped over my feet as I stumbled down the rest of the steps.

As I made my way down, I noticed a number of others in the hall. Gaia and Genie stood, arm in arm, but Wit was also there. I raised an eyebrow as I saw Chesh among those waiting in the hall.

Raven stepped forward, taking my hand as I took the last two steps. His eyes didn't leave my face as he brought my knuckles to his lips, brushing the back of my hand with a soft kiss.

"Miss Rowntree, you look..."—Raven shook his head slightly, as though lost for words for a moment.—"so beautiful this evening."

"As do you, Mr. Cappello," I replied, then caught myself. "H-handsome, I mean." I felt a red flush creep up my neck and searched around for something else to say. "Do you expect the others will come?" I added in a low voice.

Raven leaned closer. "I hope so. I really hope there will be a good turnout. Did you speak to your mother about the event?"

I nodded. "She promised to speak to the captain of the city guard this morning."

"And she did," Alice said as she came up behind me, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"Mother?" I looked at her, noticing that she was dressed in one of her best dresses—with layers of blue lace and ribbons, fastened with gold buttons. Her hair was tied into a bun, and teardrop pearls hung from her ears. "Are you going out this evening too?" I couldn't disguise the surprise in my voice.

She raised an eyebrow. "I hear someone has organized a *Big Night Out*," she replied. "I didn't want to be left at home. Besides," she added, as Wit walked up to her and turned a deep shade of red. "Dr. Lapin asked me to accompany him to dinner."

"You know Dr. Lapin?" Then I remembered Wit had spoken of my mother, as though he'd met her a long time ago.

Alice looked sideways at Wit, giving him a knowing smile. He turned an even brighter shade of red. "Dr. Lapin and I are old friends."

"Chesh, darling!" Pearl's voice rang out as she came to stand at the top of the stairway. We all looked up at her, dressed in a beautiful peach-colored gown, with her hair tumbling over one shoulder in ringlet curls. She beamed down at Chesh. When I looked across at him, he looked sideways at me before returning his attention to Pearl. He took her arm, giving her a quick peck on the cheek, before guiding her over to where I was standing with Raven and Alice. I turned my face away, tightening my hold on Raven's arm, as I tried to pretend I wasn't upset by the glow on Pearl's face, or the sight of their arms entwined.

"Where will you be dining this evening?" Chesh asked, looking pointedly at me.

"I believe we were assigned to The Menagerie," Raven replied.

Chesh's eyes lit up. "How fortunate," he said. "We will be dining in the same place. Perhaps we should—"

"And you, Mother? Dr. Lapin?" I asked, cutting Chesh off, both hoping to hide my discomfort at the idea of dining in the same restaurant as Chesh and Pearl this evening, as well as any suggestion that the four of us might dine together. The last thing I wanted was to be watched on my first outing in public with Raven.

"We'll be eating at Fire and Brimstone," Dr. Lapin replied. "I believe it is a new establishment on Third Avenue."

Alice gave him a smile. "How lovely. It's been a long time since I've stepped out in the city just for fun." She turned to me and kissed me on the cheek. "Have a lovely evening. If there is any sign of a disturbance, make sure you alert the city guard—they have been given strict instructions to keep the peace and to ensure that nobody is prevented from entering licensed establishments on the grounds of their appearance."

She and Dr. Lapin left, accompanied by Gaia and Genie, who were dining at another restaurant on Third Avenue.

“Shall we?” Chesh asked.

“We shall be along directly,” Raven answered before I had the chance to say anything.

Chesh looked at me for a moment, before Pearl tugged at his arm. “Come on, Chesh, darling,” she said. “It is an absolutely magical evening. Let’s take a scenic walk to the restaurant. We’ll see you there, Ivy.”

Finally, the door behind them closed, and I breathed out, letting my head bow for a moment before I turned to Raven.

He was watching me cautiously. “Are you alright?” he asked. “Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

I swallowed. Raven had taken my relief for disappointment—that Chesh was taking Pearl to dinner, not me. I started to shake my head. “No, no, no...” I waved a hand, trying to get my thoughts in order. Then I took a deep breath. “I’m perfectly well,” I said, taking his hand firmly. “Yes, I’m looking forward to our date.” I lifted my eyebrows. “What exactly are we waiting for?”

“Them to leave,” he replied, then winked at me. He fetched a large box from the entry. “I brought this for you,” he said and set the box in my hands. There was a hint of nervous anticipation on his face.

The box was light in my hands. “What is it?”

“Open it,” he replied.

I did as I was bid and opened the box. Inside was a hat. I lifted it out and held it up to study it. It was a black top hat, but around the brim was a set of goggles, rather than ribbons and bows, along with a series of small wheels and cogs that looked like they might have a place on the inside of a pocket watch. The metal detailing gleamed copper against the black felt of the hat.

“This is beautiful,” I said. “I love it.”

“Let me help you with it,” Raven stepped closer and fixed the hat on my head. He stepped back, studying me. His look was calculating and critical as he stared.

Then he nodded once. His eyes sparkled, and his smile widened into one of complete pleasure. “Yes,” he whispered. “I’ve found it.”

“My perfect hat?”

I smiled, touching the brim of the hat. It sat easily on my head—not too heavy, not uncomfortable, not awkward—made for me. Even better, the

way Raven's eyes danced as he looked at me gave me a warm feeling inside.

I caught sight of myself in the long mirror in the hall. "You're right." I smiled, putting a finger on the brim. "It's perfect."

He gave me a slight bow then offered me his arm. "Shall we go, my lady?"



The city was busier than usual—far busier.

Raven and I walked slowly down the boulevard, making our way towards our assigned restaurant. We were not in a rush, but there were so many people in the streets that it was impossible to move at any speed. People moved in pairs, or groups, and spilled from the footpaths onto the roads. Drivers sitting on top of steam carriages yelled at the people dashing across the roads, but even they had to accept that the crowds wouldn't allow for any speed through the city.

Along the way, we saw evidence that the unbeautiful of the city had heeded the call to show their faces for the Big Night Out.

Raven's fashionable cane tapped on the cobblestones as we walked.

"Why do you carry a cane?" I asked as we walked. "Don't tell me it's just because it's fashionable?"

"I am very old," Raven raised an eyebrow at me, then winked.

I gave him a look. "You don't need a cane."

"They are very fashionable," Raven protested. "I wouldn't want to shame you by presenting at less than my best."

I gave him a sideways look. He'd certainly made sure to dress for the occasion, and I couldn't fault his attention to detail—he was perfectly put together.

"You know I don't care about fashion," I said. Raven smiled and patted my hand.

"I know, but..." A shadow passed over his face. He looked over his shoulder. "I didn't want to give anyone an excuse to judge me poorly tonight. I have a feeling we're going to attract enough attention already."

As he spoke, he tipped his hat to another couple that he appeared to know from the tunnels. As we made our way along the streets, he

wordlessly greeted couple after couple—we'd passed vampire couples, couples who were tattered and torn, even in their best clothing, and those who were scarred and disfigured, yet walking with their heads high.

Regular citizens stared at these unfamiliar faces on the streets of the city, but we endeavored to act as though everything was completely normal. They also stared at us—though neither of us, as individuals, were out of place on the streets of Melfall, it was unheard of to see a vampire and a human woman walking about together.

I realized Raven had brought his cane, not for need or for fashion, but so as to blend into the crowd as much as possible. He'd been under no illusions about what we might face tonight.

On the other hand, I found myself blushing under glares from other people. Now, I could really sympathize with those who were physically disfigured. No wonder many of them had chosen to live their lives in hiding, rather than face such obvious stares and disapproval.

The city guards were to be found on every street corner, making their presence known. I witnessed one man walk up to a guard and demand he “do something” about the presence of a man scarred by the pox. The guard cheerfully replied that the city streets were open to everyone.

Raven and I didn't speak much. I spent most of the walk scanning the streets for evidence that the Big Night Out was going as planned. Not only that, but a heavy sense of anticipation was building inside me as we drew closer to *The Menagerie*.

It was one thing to walk down the street with a vampire, but quite another to gain entry to a fashionable restaurant.

As we walked up to *The Menagerie*, Raven leaned down toward me and whispered, “Are you ready?”

I didn't risk answering him in case my voice trembled, but I lifted my chin and nodded, staring at the door to the restaurant with a sense of newfound determination.

If the unbeautiful people of this city could work up the courage to come out of hiding to show the city what the aesthetic laws had done, then I could be brave too.

As we approached, I saw a city guard striding down the street. I recognized him from my visit to the wall—it was Captain Walsh. I smiled and raised my hand in greeting. The captain saw me, and his eyes lit up in

recognition. He gave me a salute and stopped beside us as we approached our assigned restaurant.

“Any trouble?” he asked.

“Not yet,” I murmured, glancing at the doorman who was looking at Raven and me hesitantly. “Any reports of disturbances elsewhere?”

“A few minor scuffles, but don’t worry yourself with that. They’ve been dealt with in accordance with our orders.”

“I’m pleased to hear it,” I replied, turning my attention to the doorman as we stood in front of the door.

The large wooden door was set into an ornate doorframe, with flaming torches set into each side. I hadn’t noticed as we’d approached, but now I could see that the doorframe was carved with gargoyles, their mouths open to display their fangs. The shadows cast from the torches made the monsters look as though they were screaming at us in warning. The door itself was carved and set with mother of pearl to look like dozens of pairs of eyes staring out of the darkness at us.

“A table for two, please,” Raven said in answer to the doorman’s question.

“For two?” the doorman asked, his eyes flickering to Captain Walsh, who was still standing next to us.

“For two,” Raven confirmed.

The doorman looked at me, then glanced behind him. “I’ll have to check whether we have any available tables.”

“I can see several empty tables through the window,” Captain Walsh said firmly, giving the doorman a glare. “Any one of them will be quite suitable.”

The doorman shuffled his feet, glancing again at the captain before pushing the door open. “As you wish.”

He reluctantly held the door open, and we stepped through the darkened doorway and entered *The Menagerie*.

The contrast couldn’t have been more acute—outside the door was dark and menacing. Inside, I wanted to look everywhere at once—the room was a riot of light and color. Near the doorway, there were tables that bloomed like red mushrooms with white spots, with seats shaped into caterpillars, hunched and crawling, or carved to look like snails. The walls were held together at each corner with fawns, hooves on the floor while their human-shaped upper bodies held the domed roof on their shoulders. In the center of

the restaurant was a pool, and, as though waiting in the water, a walrus sat on a rock, complete with long-pointed tusks, a curled mustache, and a top hat.

As I stared around me, the chatter in the room fell to a hush. All eyes in the restaurant turned to stare at us as though we were more interesting than the interior of the restaurant. I felt a blush rise to my cheeks, even as I squared my shoulders and walked determinedly between the tables. The doorman pointedly led us past several empty tables at the front of the restaurant, to make our way towards the back.

Near the window, Chesh and Pearl were already seated on chairs shaped like fish standing on their tails at a table that was shaped like a starfish arched upon its points. Chesh turned to look at me as I walked past. He raised a hand as though to wave me over. I gave him a small nod, which he returned with a smile, but I continued to follow the doorman to the back. As we passed, I didn't miss the glare he turned on Raven.

We wound through the restaurant before being seated in the back corner at a table that was crammed into a small space between the wall and the doorway to the kitchens.

Raven pulled out my chair for me as I sat down. Our table was shaped like an upturned tulip, with seats made to look like leaves.

"Well, this is cozy," he said, though there was a strained expression on his face.

I glanced at my surroundings as Raven settled himself opposite me. Though it was inside, the restaurant had the feel of a courtyard, and all of the tables were arranged around the central water feature—the walrus that gave the appearance of overlooking proceedings with an air of aloof superiority. In the water around the walrus, dolphins and whales were carved from stone, water spurting from their blowholes. The water sparkled gold, reflecting the light of the hundreds of tiny lamps shaped like fireflies that hung from the ceiling. Above, the domed glass ceiling, the night sky glittered with thousands of tiny stars.

As I looked around at the restaurant, Chesh caught my eye again. I gave him a quick smile then turned back to Raven once more.

Raven seemed to have seen my exchange with Chesh, and he looked uncertain before reaching across the table to take my hand. I tensed, feeling the eyes and the judgment of every other patron in the restaurant.

“Relax,” Raven said, squeezing my fingers. “Nothing is going to happen. We’ll eat. We’ll drink some wine. We’ll go home. Just like any other couple.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“You’re not embarrassed?”

“Why?” I asked, pretending not to know the reason he asked.

Raven raised one eyebrow, clearly not fooled by my act. “To be seen in public with a vampire. With me.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that.”

Raven’s mouth flattened into a line. “Really?” he asked, his tone soft.

“I just don’t like being stared at.”

Raven gave me a half-smile. “That surprises me. You are a beautiful woman. I wonder that you don’t attract glances more often.”

I felt myself blush. “Even if that’s true,” I said. “Being beautiful in a city full of beautiful people is not notable—especially with a sister like Pearl.”

“Meaning?”

“She is stunning. I’m used to the unflattering comparisons between us.”

Raven frowned. “She is beautiful too, I don’t deny that, but you are strikingly unforgettable.”

“That’s very kind,” I murmured.

“Not kind at all. Simply the truth.”

There was a sudden disturbance several tables away. I glanced over to see Chesh and Pearl following a waiter, who hurried to clear and reset a table only two seats from us. It was shaped like a frog, set with six seats around it shaped like tadpoles. Pearl beamed at me and gave me a wave.

“That other table was entirely unsuitable,” she said, loudly. “Do you know who they sat next to us? I was staring at a man missing an eye and a scar down one side of his face! Chesh demanded that we be moved to a table with more pleasing surroundings.”

“Shhh,” I hissed at her, looking around to see if anyone else had heard. Then I put a hand over my eyes, trying to ignore the blush that was burning two spots into my cheeks.

I glanced at Chesh, who was glaring at the spot where Raven and I were holding hands. I fought the instinct to snatch my hand away, and instead, reached over to take his other hand again and tighten my grip on his fingers.

“Now, we’re closer to you!” Pearl gushed.

“This table will be more suitable,” Chesh said, clipping his words as he sat down.

My heart sank. They were in earshot of our entire dinner conversation. The feeling of being watched increased.

“Perhaps we should order wine?” Raven suggested, turning his attention to the menu. He leaned forward. “The wine comes from the blowfish,” he nodded his head at the opposite corner of the room where a bloated fish with pointed spines all over its body squirted a ruby red liquid from its mouth into a large bowl.

“You mean, that’s wine? It’s drinkable?”

“Look,” Raven pointed as one of the waiters dipped a carafe into the sparkling red liquid pouring out of the mouth of the fish, before hurrying over to deliver the carafe to a table and pour it into wine glasses.

I grinned. “I’m game to try it.”

Raven raised a hand to get the attention of the nearest waiter.

She ignored him, stopping at Chesh and Pearl’s table to take their order instead. My mouth went dry, hoping the waiter had simply failed to see us.

When she walked past our table again, my stomach sank. Raven’s smile wavered. He indicated to the woman again. Finally, unable to ignore us any longer, she slammed down two menus onto the table, then strode away without speaking. Raven wasn’t smiling now. His mouth was set into a thin line.

Next to us, a family who had just sat down at a table started speaking loudly to the waiter. They were demanding to be reseated, but I could see that there weren’t any other tables in the restaurant, which was now full. A moment later, they were gathering their things and left.

I felt myself stiffen in my seat and swallowed down a lump in my throat. Trying to ignore the feeling that everyone’s eyes were on me, I reached out to pick up the menu and opened it.

“Do you have any recommendations about what’s best to eat?” I asked Raven.

Raven raised one eyebrow. “I always order a bloody steak, so I’m not sure that I’m the best one to advise you.”

I froze, staring at him with wide eyes before I burst out laughing. His serious expression broke into a grin.

“Better a rare steak than taking a bit out of you, eh?” he added.

Then both of us were shaking with silent laughter.

Tears of laughter streamed down my cheeks before I noticed a figure standing next to our table.

I dabbed at my eyes with my handkerchief, expecting to see the waiter had returned to take our order.

Instead, Chesh was standing at the table, his fists bunched by his sides, glaring at Raven. His curly hair, which had been groomed into a neat ponytail with gel, now stuck up at an unusual angle, as though he'd dragged his hand through it.

"What are you doing?" I hissed, glancing around at the other tables whose occupants were now openly gawking at us. Even Pearl was looking at him, her blue eyes wide, and her mouth turned down slightly at the edges as she gripped the edge of the table with both hands.

Raven started to stand, as though to address Chesh when Chesh leaned over and grasped him by the cravat tied around his neck in an elaborate knot.

Chesh hauled Raven forward, dragging him across the table towards him, while Raven resisted and grabbed Chesh's arm, as though trying to loosen his grip on his shirtfront.

Chesh bared his teeth, and pulled back his other arm, about to swing a fist at Raven.

"No!" I pushed out my chair so hard that it fell backward as I got to my feet, throwing myself between Chesh and Raven. There was a sickening crunching sound as Chesh's fist connected with Raven's face. I reached out and caught Chesh's arm a fraction too late, but pulled him back anyway, away from Raven.

Raven had his fingers on his nose, his head bowed so that his black hair hung loosely over his face.

"What are you doing?" I glared at Chesh, raising my voice—no longer caring who was looking. Behind him, Pearl stood up and moved hesitantly over so that she was standing just behind Chesh. She tried to reach out for his arm, but he was looking at me and reached out with both hands to lay them on my shoulders.

I was shaking my head, gritting my teeth, and I shrugged off Chesh's hands as soon as he touched me.

"I heard what he said about you," Chesh started. He ignored Pearl's attempts to take his arm. He reached out again, this time to touch my face,

but I jerked away. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that, but it made me so angry. He should never speak so to you. To threaten you that way.”

“It wasn’t a threat—” I said as I shook my head.

“He said he would hurt you, bite you,” he continued, his voice hardening.

“You’re—”

“No, listen to me. He doesn’t deserve you. You shouldn’t be here with him—”

“I can—”

“You should be here with me,” Chesh said. The words dropped like stones in the pond. I was staring at Chesh, open-mouthed as the words registered slowly in my consciousness. Suddenly I became aware that everyone in the restaurant was listening. Behind Chesh, Pearl covered her mouth with her hand, and her eyes filled with tears. “I love you, Ivy. There’s never been anyone for me but you. I should have told you earlier—before he brainwashed you to believe—”

“No!” Pearl’s shriek filled the air.

I glanced over at my sister as Pearl covered her face with her hands. With a sob, she turned and ran out of the restaurant, knocking into a table on her way, overturning it so that the wine glasses smashed into a million tiny shards of glass that scattered all over the floor.



I stared after Pearl, frozen to the spot, as the restaurant seemed to spin into motion again. Exclamations of shock and surprise filled my ears, and waiters rushed around to clean up the mess.

Slowly, I turned my attention back to my table, where both Chesh and Raven were staring at me.

“Go after her,” I said, with an edge to my voice.

“Ivy, I—”

I held up my hand to stop him, then was silent for a moment as I struggled to keep my emotions in check. Then I curled my hand into a fist. “Go.”

“Come with me,” Chesh said, holding out a hand to me. “Please, I don’t want to leave you,” Chesh’s eyes flickered towards where Raven was now

standing. "You'll be safer with me."

"I would never hurt Ivy," Raven replied, his voice like steel. Then he glanced at me and inclined his head. "It is your choice."

"I'll stay," I replied.

Chesh reached out for me, but I stepped back. "Leave."

He paused, as though trying to decide what to do, then he sighed and hung his head.

"Good night, Ivy," he said, reluctantly moving away. Every person in the restaurant stared at him as he left, then turned to stare at us.

I swallowed, suddenly flushing at being, yet again, the center of attention. I looked at Raven, who ran a finger down the bridge of his nose, an action I knew meant he was deep in thought.

I knelt to pick up the napkin that had fallen to the floor when I'd leaped out of my chair. As I stood, Raven moved around the table to put a hand on my elbow.

"Perhaps we should leave?" he whispered, his breath tickling my earlobe.

I felt the lightness of relief and nodded. I tossed the napkin onto the table and tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow.

The waiters fetched our coats and hats before we stepped out of the restaurant door into the warm evening breeze.



Along the street, tables and chairs overflowed from the restaurants and cafes onto the footpaths, as couples and groups enjoyed the balmy night. With the hundreds of extra people who had stepped out for the *Big Night Out*, the streets were full of people, spilling out of the establishments, or just taking a walk along the avenues.

I saw a guard on patrol on the corner, but there was a smile on his face that indicated that he was enjoying the evening just as much as everyone else.

Mr. Thackery was sitting at an outdoor table with his wife and children. He held his wife's hand and smiled as one of his children wolfed down the meal, barely pausing between bites.

"The night has been a success for some, at least," Raven murmured.

I felt tight all over, wound tight like the mechanism in one of my pocket watches. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of red and spun around, coming to crouch into a fighting pose.

A woman with three bright red feathers curving in a plume over her head walked past, arm in arm with a girlfriend. They were engaged in conversation and didn't notice my behavior.

"Ivy?" Raven said softly before laying a hand gently on my shoulder. "What is it?"

I straightened, feeling foolish. "Nothing," I replied, though I stared both ways down the street, just to be sure. "I think I saw... Never mind, just my eyes playing tricks on me."

"You weren't expecting the level of animosity that we received at the restaurant?" Raven asked. He tucked his hands in his trouser pockets as he stood in front of me, waiting for me to answer him.

I looked up at his expression, seeing the straight set of his mouth and the hint of sadness in his eyes. I shook my head. "But you were," I said.

He nodded. "It wasn't the evening that I'd hoped for—I wanted to show you a night out that we'd both remember. Well, I suppose we'll remember it, but not for the right reasons. Still, you got a taste of what the unbeautiful people of this city—including vampires—experience all the time."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't expect to feel so...vulnerable." I swallowed, remembering the way everyone in the restaurant had looked at me. As though they found me disgusting. "I didn't expect to feel so disliked."

"I'm sorry too." Raven reached out to take my hand.

"Do you think it will ever change?"

Raven tipped his head, the edge of his mouth curling into a smile. "Of course," he replied. "I have to believe that this is the beginning of something new. Look around—" He spread his hand as though surveying the street.

People sat at tables and chairs, the fashionable seated next to those who were not beautiful or fashionable by any measure. Mr. Thackery's family appeared to be enjoying themselves—or at least the food—as they sat at a wrought iron table and chairs on the footpath. As I watched, though, the beautiful woman seated next to Mr. Thackery's family glanced over her shoulder before shifting her chair a little further away. As though she

wanted to put some distance between them. As though somehow a lack of beauty might be catching.

I looked farther and noticed the looks being exchanged by the beautiful people and those who were not.

“Do you really think so?” I murmured uncertainly.

“Believe me, Ivy, this is progress.” Raven put a finger under my chin and turned my face up towards his as he leaned down so that his nose was almost touching mine. He paused a moment, looking into my eyes, before brushing his lips to mine in a kiss so brief that I wondered if it had even happened. He smiled at me. “The evening is still young. Perhaps we could walk a little and enjoy the beauty of this night?”

He held out an arm. I grinned at him as I looped my arm through his. We stepped away from the people seated on the footpath and walked slowly along the avenue underneath the lamps. In this part of the city, they were shaped like dragons, rearing up on their hind legs, copper scales gleaming while they hissed fire into the night sky.

We left the crowd behind, and with every few steps, we walked in and out of the pools of light created by the street lamps. We fell into silence. I tightened my hold on Raven, moving closer to him, then leaned the side of my cheek against his shoulder.

After a while, Raven cleared his throat, putting his hand over where mine was tucked into the crook of his elbow. “Ivy, did you want to come to dinner with me tonight?”

My mouth went dry, and a lump formed in my throat. “Yes,” I whispered.

“You seemed...unsure,” he said. “Afraid, even.”

I glanced up at him. “When?”

“When I came to pick you up tonight.”

I stopped walking, and he took another step forward. With our arms entwined, he half-turned to me as he came to a stop. “Why are you asking me this?”

The lump in Raven’s throat bobbed as he swallowed before he spoke. “Your friend, Mr. Cheshire said some things to you tonight—”

“He was speaking out of turn,” I interrupted. “It was rude.”

“Yes, it was,” Raven agreed. “That doesn’t mean he was wrong.”

“I don’t understand.”

Raven turned to face me, taking both of my hands in his. He ran the pad of his thumbs lightly over my knuckles, looking down. Refusing to meet my eyes.

“You and Mr. Cheshire are good friends. Perhaps you are more than good friends. If that is so...” He started to pull his hands away from mine.

“Yes, Mr. Cheshire and I are good friends.” I tightened my grip on Raven’s hands, pulling him towards me. “That’s *all* we are.”

“Are you sure?” Raven looked up at me, frowning. I saw concern in his eyes. I started to nod my head, but Raven stopped me. “He’s right, you know—this relationship, between us, would not be easy. Certainly not for you. Change takes time, especially when trying to change people’s minds. Many of your friends wouldn’t want to be seen with you any longer if you were linked romantically with me. You saw how it was in the restaurant tonight. That’s how it might always be. Can you live with that?”

His words fell like stones in my stomach. I let my gaze drift from his face, falling until I was staring at his shoes.

“What about you?” I asked, my voice so small that I wasn’t sure he would hear me. “Can you just walk away so easily?”

A moment elapsed. Then Raven exhaled his answer: “No.” He swallowed. “But I will—if you ask me to.”

Could I?

The ticking of the Pinnacle clock filled my mind, obscuring my thoughts. I squeezed my eyes shut, thinking about all of the times we’d spent together—in truth, it was hardly any time at all. We’d snatched a few hours together, here and there. He’d occupied more space in my thoughts than he’d spent next to me. Nevertheless, next to me, or away from me, he made my heart race. More than that, since the first conversation we’d had, he’d challenged my views, showed me things I’d never imagined, revealed a side of the world I’d never seen. I’d always had an inkling that our city wasn’t quite right, and Raven had shown me the truth. He’d given me a purpose—more purpose than I’d ever had. He’d given me a reason to fight for change.

I thought about Chesh and the love he’d declared for me tonight. On a certain level, I’d always known our friendship was unequal. While I kept him at arm’s length, he would have taken more if I’d given him an opportunity. I’d been jealous of Pearl when he’d shown interest in her, but not because Chesh made my heart race. It was because Chesh was mine—

my safe harbor. Someone I'd believed would always be there for me if I ever decided I wanted him.

In the dancing lamplight of the dragon's fire, I knew what I had with Chesh was different to what I had with Raven. It would never be the same.

And I didn't want it to be.

I looked up at Raven and tightened my grip on his hands. "I can't walk away from you so easily, either." I reached up to wrap my arms around his neck, pulling his face down towards mine. "And I don't want to," I whispered.



It was the sound of an upbeat tune wafting through the air that brought us back to the moment. Raven pulled away, cocking his head to the side.

"I do believe that's the sound of dancing," he said. He turned and scanned the avenue. He pointed in the direction of the wide paved circle in the city center, but I couldn't see anything but the row of lamplights in the dark.

Raven held out his hand. "Will you grant me the honor of the first dance, my lady?" He smiled, the gleaming white of his teeth flashing against the darkness.

My smile spread so wide that my cheeks hurt. I bobbed a curtsy, then took his hand. "I believe I shall, sir," I replied.

He laughed and started tugging me towards the music. I shrieked as I stumbled forwards, and the sound bounced off the stone buildings lining each side of the avenue. I kept my feet, then somehow, we were both running down the street, skirts and tailcoats flying as we made for the music.

When we arrived at the city center, a crowd of people had gathered under the spire of the Pinnacle. As we moved closer, I saw a band of four or five musicians playing lively tunes and people dancing under the face of the Pinnacle clock, which glowed as though it was the moon. We didn't pause at the edge of the dance to take any notice of the details—instead, we flung ourselves into the swarm of partners. The music was lively, and dance partners smiled, with eyes only for each other, as they swirled around and

around. Raven took one hand in mine, and wrapped the other around the small of my back, holding me close to him as he led me into the dance.

His feet moved like the music flowed through them, and I struggled to keep up, but it didn't matter. One song merged into another, becoming louder and louder, as the night wore on and the throng of dancers grew. As though there was some sort of magic in the air, more and more people were drawn to the crowd and joined in the dancing. It was almost as though the impromptu dancing had drawn the revelers—beautiful and unbeautiful alike—out of the restaurants and bars of the city and to the paved cobblestones of the city center.

In the dance, the distinctions between the beautiful and unbeautiful fell away. None of it mattered. As we moved in time to the beat of the music—and to the rhythm of each other—Raven stared down at me like there was nobody else in the world, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from his.

It was as though everything else in the world ceased to exist, except for Raven and I in this moment. This perfect moment.

Then the music drew into a crescendo, and the bells of the Pinnacle clock started to strike twelve.



Dong.

The music stopped in an instant.

Raven swirled me around one more time before taking my face in both hands and kissing me. Around me, people crashed into each other as they looked around to see why the music had stopped. Someone laughed.

Dong.

Raven pulled away, then looked away to the side. He frowned. I glanced around, breathing heavily, suddenly clammy in the evening air. I pushed a stray hair away from my face and looked up at the Pinnacle clock.

Dong.

Raven straightened, suddenly tense. He was looking away from the Pinnacle clock, to the outer edge of the city center. Everyone else stared up, mesmerized by the chiming sound and the glowing face of the clock.

Dong.

I tugged on Raven's shirt and stretched up onto my toes to whisper in his ear. "What is it?"

Raven's mouth was pressed into a thin line. "Can you hear that?" he asked.

I listened. Then I heard it, too—the sound I'd mistaken for the ticking of the clock. The sound of hundreds of footsteps marching exactly in time.

Dong.

"That's the same sound we heard last night, wasn't it?" I asked.

Raven nodded. "The Hearts," he said, and at the very moment the words left his mouth, the first Hearts appeared out of the darkness.

Dong.

Someone screamed, and I jumped. The Hearts didn't advance, but with every tick of the clock, more Hearts appeared, spreading around so that they made a perimeter around the circular edge of the city center.

Dong.

I spun around to run in the opposite direction but froze. "They're surrounding us," I hissed. A frisson of adrenalin surged through me as I understood what they were doing. I took a step forward, lifting my skirts as I got ready to run towards the last remaining gaps in the perimeter. "We've got to get out of here," I said and raised my voice so that the people around me could hear.

Dong.

The dancers started to scatter, as they came to the same conclusion as I had. Everyone was moving in different directions. Raven grabbed my hand, pulling me towards one of the gaps in the circle.

Dong.

A Heart marched into the gap that Raven and I had been heading for. It stopped, turning to face us, with its broad card-body almost touching the cards on each side of it—like a wall. We couldn't fit through the gap. I spun around again, searching frantically for a way out.

Dong.

What had Alice said about the Hearts? They used to kill. I spun around again, looking for another gap. I ran straight into Gaia and Genie.

"We've got to..." I yelled out to them, trying to warn them about the Hearts. Then I saw Alice, hand-in-hand with Wit. She was staring at the Hearts, her face white with fear.

Dong.

There was another scream, but this time I recognized it. Pearl. I spun around, trying to locate her in the frenzy of the crowd. People were running to and fro, but there was nowhere to go. The Hearts had penned us in, like cattle.

“Ivy!” Raven yelled.

At the sound of his voice, I spun around to face outward the circle of Hearts. They’d made a solid wall with their square card-bodies and were holding their spears at the ready. The pointed tips of the spears glinted in the luminescent light of the Pinnacle clock.

Dong.

As the final chime brought in the new day, the Hearts all marched forward as one.

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THE KINGDOM OF FAIRYTALES TEAM

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Gigi Nickerson, Amanda Hurst & Coralee Butterfield

ABOUT J.A. ARMITAGE

J.A lives in a total fantasy world (because reality is boring right?) When she's not writing all the crazy fun in her head, she can be found eating cake, designing pretty pictures and hanging upside down from the tallest climbing frame in the local playground while her children look on in embarrassment. She's travelled the world working as everything from a banana picker in Australia to a Pantomime clown, has climbed to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and the bottom of the Grand Canyon and once gave birth to a surrogate baby for a friend of hers.

She spends way too much time gossiping on facebook and if you want to be part of her Reading Army, where you'll get lots of freebies, exclusive sneak peeks and super secret sales, join up here

<https://www.subscribepage.com/v7o8k4>

Somehow she finds time to write.



ABOUT ZARA QUENTIN

Zara Quentin is a fantasy author, book lover and traveller. Raised in Adelaide, Australia, Zara grew up with a strong sense of adventure, which she inherited from her parents, who took her and her sister on trips to the United States, Europe, and Asia.

She also inherited a love of reading from her mother. Throughout her childhood she explored fictional places through books, and in particular, through fantasy novels. She'd turn the black and white text on the page into the colourful worlds of her imagination. Later, she put pen to paper and started creating her own.

After graduating from high school, Zara studied at the University of Adelaide and has lived in France, London, and Auckland, New Zealand. She is always determined to stimulate her imagination with as much travel as possible, spending time in Europe, the United States, southern Africa, Morocco, Peru, the Pacific and south-east Asia.

Zara now resides in Melbourne, Australia with her husband and three children. She is the author of the Airwoman series, and is currently working on a brand new project.